



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



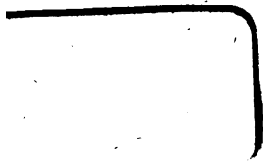
3 3433 07574484 1

ESTHER MATHER

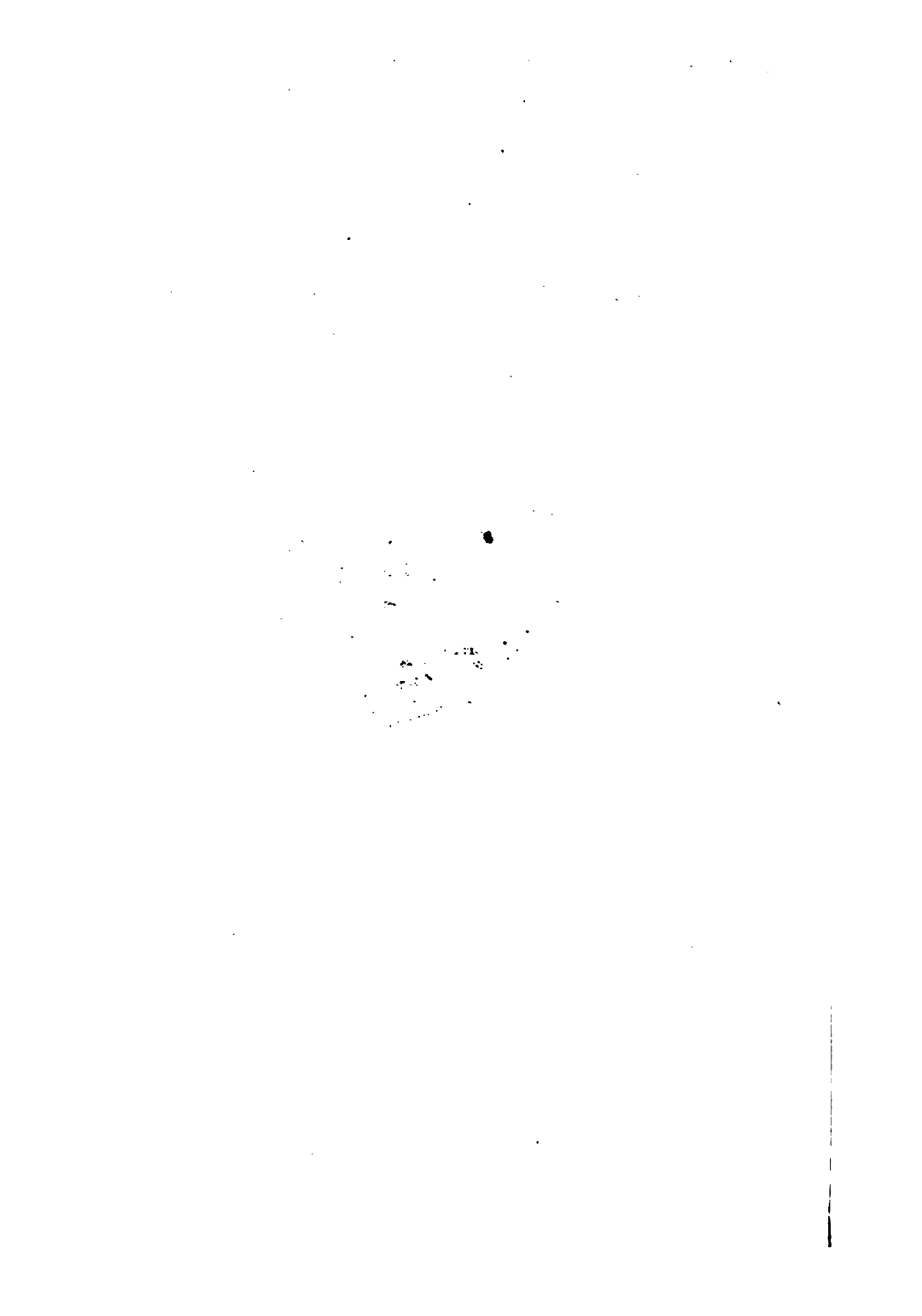


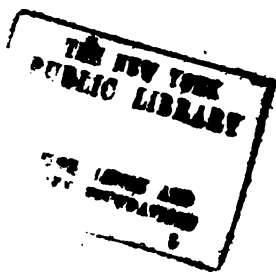
Emma Louise Orcutt

1. No subject



NCW
Druitt







ESTHER MARRIAGE

A ROMANCE

EMMA LOUISE CHILD



THE GRAFTON PRESS

NEW YORK MDCI



ESTHER MATHER

A ROMANCE

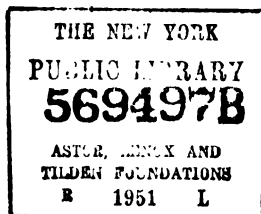
BY

EMMA LOUISE ORCUTT



THE GRAFTON PRESS

NEW YORK MDCI



Copyright 1901
BY
EMMA LOUISE ORCUTT

**I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY COUSIN,
WILLIAM P. FULLER,
IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF HIS KIND ENCOURAGEMENT
AND AID.
EMMA LOUISE ORCUTT.**

ESTHER MATHER.

CHAPTER I.

To but few is given the privilege of looking at that jewel, into whose depths Esther Mather looked one night. In its emblematic colors they read the truth and poetry and music of her nature. Because of youth, which has kindly walked with them through the years, they can see the clear, deep love-light in her eyes, stronger than grief or pain, as she thrusts away the gem.

All these graces had not yet come to her, however, as she sat within the shade of a favorite oak one afternoon, looking fearlessly out upon the world. Then she was only a girl, ignorant that beneath the lights and shadows in her eyes were glimpses of strength beyond her understanding.

I would present her to you as plain in appearance, thinking you might prefer it so; but, when I speak of Esther Mather, Truth is ever at my side, and if I should attempt such an evasion of her rights, she would give me a sharp rap on my knuckles, compelling me to tell you that she was fair, very fair, to look upon.

An expression of troubled thought clouded her face that day, although she did not know that she had reached the parting of the way, as she conscientiously struggled

with her own and Aunt Nancy's likes and dislikes. She clearly saw that their natures could never blend; that in certain ways there must be clashing and tumult, in others, peace and love. Could the two be made to harmonize?

Earnestness at length gave place to a smile around the proud mouth, as Esther watched Uncle Eben at his work in the meadow across the way, softly humming the while. The quaint figure in the loosely-fitting overalls and old straw hat appealed to her artistic sense; yet, she knew that kindly eyes looked from under the ragged brim, that a warm heart beat beneath the well-worn waistcoat, and she silently sent a message of gratitude, as she watched the spreading of the hay.

Half conscious of the rapidity of her uncle's strokes and half dreaming, she was startled by hearing Aunt Nancy pronounce her name in a decided tone. She looked up to find a finger pointed at a discolored spot on an otherwise immaculate sleeve.

"Esther, my child," Mrs. Hathaway exclaimed.

The reprimand caused a blush and the lowering of eyes.

"Do you know what that means?" Mrs. Hathaway questioned.

The momentary confusion passed from Esther's face, and, looking mischievously up, she replied: "Certainly, I know, Aunty. It is a mixture of ivory white, chrome yellow, and crimson red, with a goodly dash of crayon to give it substance."

"No, Esther," and there was real grief in her words, "it is wasted time and smothered conscience. I fear you have little conscience, my child."

The girl frowned at the implication. "On the contrary, Aunt Nancy," she replied with a decided ring

in her voice, "that one possession is the bane of my life. I wish I had none."

"Esther."

"I do. Then I could have another year at the Hilles-ter school with no compunctions about you and Uncle Eben, bless his heart. A small chance is better than none, and those two years revealed to me a world outside the one in which I live. I had a taste of the pleasure of study and work and conquest; yes, conquest, even if that does not denote a sufficient amount of humility. There is an intoxicating exhilaration about it. It can never be, however," she ended sadly. "Never."

"I don't see how it can," Mrs. Hathaway replied, taking a seat near Esther. "I wanted you to have the second year, yet my judgment was against mortgaging the farm to do it, but your uncle was set. You know he is pretty set sometimes. I didn't know you was wasting so much time singin' and daubin', though. I s'posed it was spent in learnin' 'rithmetic and grammar. If it had been you might help pay the mortgage some day."

"I will try as it is, Aunty. The sacrifice for me has caused anxious forebodings to-day. And oh, dear! But the arithmetic is all right. I know it. And, Aunt Nancy," Esther laughed, "if you do not like the singing, please put cotton in your ears, because it sings itself. Perhaps I can sell some of the things in there," she ended soberly, pointing to the house and brightening at the thought. "They may help the debt a little and give me——"

"What things?" Mrs. Hathaway interrupted.

"Those things I laughed and cried over at school. You call them daubs, Aunty. The crayon of Venus was placed opposite the class at the examination, so there

must be some merit in it; and the roses in oils was prized at thirty dollars. I never told you that. It was so easy to do, too. I just laid the beauties carelessly on my table, and I could not help making a picture of them. Well, the time is coming when there will be more things for girls to do."

"There seems to be more now than they do," Aunt Nancy smiled. "Have you mended your stockings?"

"Every one of them. There is only one thing I detest more than darning stockings, and that is wearing them with the holes. I did the work nicely, too. If disagreeable things must be done, it must be in a way to make them attractive."

"There is always the patchwork when nothing else comes to hand," Aunt Nancy cautiously ventured. "We do not want to lose you for a long time, but you have passed your eighteenth birthday, and it is prudent to prepare for what may come. No knowing what may happen some time, and it's always best to keep forehanded with your work. There's Squire Blake's son in the great house on the hill. I saw him looking at you the other day."

"What devotion, Aunty," Esther put in. "Things are serious."

"Wall, when you are old enough and he is old enough, you might do worse. Then, there is Deacon Underwood's nephew. Sent you some flowers last week. And that young student studying law you got acquainted with over to Hillester. Quilts are pretty handy, and whoever it is he will want quilts."

For a moment there was silence. Then the answer came with a decision Aunt Nancy had learned to respect, as the girl clasped her hands behind her head, and calmly looked into the earnest face before her.

"Aunt Nancy," she said, "we have discussed this subject enough. I will not cut up cloth just to sew it together again. As for quilts, if any one should chance to carry me off, I hope they will have piles and piles of them, but they will be none of my making if they are patchwork. There is a better way. I wish I could catch that bit of blue sky with that haze over it like a veil, and imprison it on canvas. It would give such a soft, delicious tone to a landscape. Do you not think Eaton dull, Aunty? It seems narrow to me. There is not room to breathe; it makes me gasp."

"Where on earth did you get such hi-ty ti-ty notions, Esther? Way over our heads, some of 'em are."

Aunt Nancy, content with her surroundings all her life, had no conception of the struggles in the mind of her niece, nor did she recognize a talent which was almost genius. Esther was ignorant of this. She only felt a vague unrest, a craving for things seemingly beyond her reach. She puzzled over Aunt Nancy's question before she replied, "I cannot tell where I got the notions. When I was put together I was not permitted to dictate as to ingredients. But such as I am I want to get all I can out of life. I have been over to Grandma Skinner's," she went on abruptly. "I read to her an hour. Her eyes are failing fast. Then I dropped into Mrs. Brown's and arranged her room for her. The lameness is better. I wonder if I do these things for their comfort or because I enjoy seeing them happy. I am not sure whether the motive is selfish or not. I would have the world all beauty and happiness, one vast clear sky. Yet," she added, eagerly, unclasping her hands and straightening up, "I like to picture storm clouds, black and threatening, rushing on full of power, almost engulfing one—almost, not quite. Away, over beyond

the hurricane's breath must be the sunshine. But here comes Uncle Eben."

Dear Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy. Although Esther was the only one in town who gave the title by right of relationship. For years they had been Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy to the old and young and middle-aged. Strangers easily accepted the affectionate way, carrying their virtues to distant homes.

As Uncle Eben approached, his usually placid face wore a look of vexation.

"Got a pesky sliver or thistle or sunthin' in my thumb," he announced. "Can you get it out, Ma?"

"Hold still, then," Aunt Nancy advised, as she arose and leisurely applied the point of a fine needle to the ball of her husband's thumb.

"A leetle more careful, Nancy," Uncle Eben begged. "How would a knife do? Ma! I should think you were diggin' for a gold mine."

"So I be, Pa," Mrs. Hathaway smiled, pausing in her discoveries. "Lookin' for the gold mine o' patience. There ain't much but specks on the surface o' men folks. Thought I'd go down to the center and see if I could find a nugget; a big shining one, such as you like to see in us women."

"Don't stop ter lecture, Ma, when I'm sufferin'."

"Wall, I will say women have too much patience for the welfare of men's souls," was the exultant conclusion. "Now, hold still, Eben, and don't jerk."

"Little Queen, you try," Mr. Hathaway suggested, turning to Esther. "Your bright eyes and spry fingers will git the pesky thing, without puttin' your old uncle in a place o' torment."

"Here's the needle," Mrs. Hathaway replied. "Your uncle acts like a colt, dancin' first on one foot and then

on the other. What kind of a martyr would you make, Eben? You'd squirm and flounder so you'd knock the fagots in all directions before they could get to blazing."

"There! Esther knows a thing or two," Mr. Hathaway declared, laying his hand affectionately on her head, as she skillfully removed the cause of so much discontent. "Uncle Eben's little queen! Ma," he added in a conciliatory tone, "Joshua Penniman, him that married Cousin Miny up in Lisbon, used to say such ebullition o' spirit was narves."

"Wall, it's over with," Aunt Nancy consoled, "and I must go over to Electa Goodwin's to borrow some indigo, so as to get the yarn ready for Eben's winter socks. Do not forget to dust the spare chamber, Esther. It must be done every day."

When they had watched Aunt Nancy walk briskly out of sight, Esther whispered a secret in Uncle Eben's ear.

"Really, Esther!" he exclaimed. "Her own picter! When can I see it?"

"Not till it is finished."

"Wonderful girl you be, Esther," Uncle Eben said proudly. "That will reconcile her, and Uncle Eben will try to do something for his little girl." Then, with a loving caress, he hurried back to his work.

Esther sat down in deep reflection. If she returned to the house, soberly spending the remaining afternoon in fulfilling some of Aunt Nancy's wishes, which she called fussy, she felt as if her ambition would die in the attempt; but, if she turned the other way—ah, the thought of that which her imagination pictured deepened the color in her cheeks and the light in her eyes.

Which would she choose? One of three forces, fate, Providence, or heredity, was settling the choice for her. If it were fate, we can only stand in silent wonder. If

it were Providence, why did not an angel of mercy come to plead for her? If it were heredity, helpless, she must battle with the volitions of generations.

And, is it one of the sad or happy decrees, that whichever path we may take at the dividing of the ways, we seldom know whether the other would have led through Elysian fields, or over a dark wilderness. Esther never knew.

With more than usual interest, her eyes wandered up and down the valley, so peaceful and picturesque. The warm sunshine brightened fields of waving grain and new-mown hay; it shone over tempting orchards, and walls covered with a riotous mass of berries and ferns. Beyond the meadow, it streamed into a clear purling brook to the astonishment of many a speckled trout; it shot its glances across into a short forest path, silent and delicious, shimmering over cool mosses and rustling leaves, finally emerging in the full splendor of its glory over the rising slope of green pastures beyond.

Esther brushed away a tear as her glance returned to the substantial red brick house, with its ample yard. A sigh unconsciously escaping her, she rose, and, with bent head, slowly passed through the gate leading to the house, stopped, turned, retraced her steps, and the gate closed resolutely behind her. That act was a decisive one in the history of her life. Who controlled it? Who closed the gate?

CHAPTER II.

EATON, MASS., July 12, 18—.

DEAR DICK:—Have been here a week. Hills and dales delightful; air clear and bracing; people quiet; but their hospitality is wonderful, and so is pie for breakfast.

I have been as steady as a deacon, but it is dull work, Dick. Forgive the thought. Fishing, though fair, is not quite up to expectations. I have been wondering what I am here for, anyway, and I have concluded to go to New York to-morrow. That town is home, yet. Will see you immediately on my arrival, and we will look up something gayer than this place. Do not frown, Dick. You would never be gay anywhere, you sober old fellow.

Have you heard anything more about Mary?

ROBERT.

When Robert had the letter addressed, he laid it aside unsealed, as there was ample time before the evening mail. Then, after a critical examination of himself in the mirror, to be assured his costume was becoming and also fashionably correct for an outing, he decided to look up his fishing tackle.

Robert Leighton chose this special pastime on that particular afternoon, just at the hour when Esther Mather, after one look back as the gate clicked behind

her, stepped lightly along the path in the meadow which led to an arbor—two persons unknown to each other walking toward the same place; the one, careless of life's responsibilities; the other, with an innocent trust in human goodness and divine mercy.

Robert started for an attractive bend in a brook, cool and dark, which he believed was not frequented by the few in the rural community, who occasionally spent an hour or two watching for trout. Luck favored him, and when he had caught enough beauties for a delicious feast, he started homeward. Farther down the brook he found a bit of shade among some alders which fringed it, and he thought he would rest there just fifteen minutes. The rippling of the water soon lulled him to sleep.

He never knew how long he slept, for, when he awoke, something happened which made him forget to look at his watch. He had gathered together his tackle and trophies, and was considering whether he would cross a convenient foot-bridge or go another way, with his hand on the way to his watch-pocket, when a slight noise attracted his attention. He peered cautiously through the bushes. He saw a young girl, tall and graceful, standing with clasped hands, in the present but not of it. The impassioned face shone with exultation, while the eyes, the violet veins beneath them deepening, were turned to a canvas before her without seeing it. Following her imagination they were peering into unknown ways, for which she longed with all her heart. The joy at the thought of them caused a gentle heaving of the bodice of her simple white dress, which was cut in a fashion to display a figure of tremulous lightness and exuberant with health.

Robert Leighton, watching Esther Mather with won-

der, did not forget to admire the finely cut features, the gold hidden in the waves of light hair, or the rare bloom of cheek, and perfect mold of throat. Once she turned her eyes in his direction, and he thought they were violets with a soul. He was a man of the world, but in this girl of whom he had never heard, he instantly recognized the possibilities of a brilliant career won by her beauty and grace. Although he failed to fathom the depth of emotion beneath the vision which enchanted him, its earnestness compelled his reverence. For a moment a ray of manhood lighed a somber chamber of his being. With closed eyes and bowed head he made a vow with his soul.

When he looked up, the dream on the girl's face had given place to a glow of enthusisam, as she changed the position of a roughly constructed easel just outside the entrance to a rustic arbor, in order to get a better light. He saw she was at work on a portrait in crayon, but the shadows of the late afternoon no longer suited her, and, laying aside her palette and paints and crayons, she placed the canvas in a strong box and hid it within the arbor, then she walked rapidly around a turn and was out of sight. Robert believed his presence was unknown. There was neither an artless simplicity of ignorance feigned, nor an artfully concealed knowledge of a society-trained young woman. For full five minutes he stood almost immovable, his face at first reflecting a determination born of honor, which slowly gave place to selfish weakness.

"Upon my word!" he finally exclaimed. "It is impossible to leave this town to-morrow. I'll just take Hiram Foss aside to-night for cross-exmation."

With congratulations at such astuteness he gathered up his fishing tackle, proudly swung the string of fish

over his shoulder, and strode rapidly toward the tavern. The tavern in Eaton was a sort of rendezvous for the village gossips. Hiram Foss, or "Old Hi," as he was popularly called, easily wore the honors of being the most complete and correct oracle. With him time was not money. Mrs. Foss better understood the inward sublimity of that maxim, and as she possessed the happy faculty of imparting elasticity to the ends of finances, so that by dint of much stretching they would meet, Hiram could enjoy a tranquil state of mind.

He had his own way of imparting information, which method was conducive to the culture of patience, and it also afforded opportunity for displaying exhaustive knowledge.

After the evening meal was over, on Robert's return to the inn, he leisurely sauntered out on the piazza and took a seat beside Hiram, remarking on the clear, bracing air of the town and its good points in general.

"By the way," he at length inquired, as if little interested in the matter, "who lives about half a mile out on the road to the left, in——"

"Oh, that is David Jenks," Hiram interrupted with enthusiasm. "Up the hill a little way. Inherited his father's place, married Jane Lawton, and a consider'ble smart couple they are. Eddicated and have quality from the city to visit 'em."

"I do not mean in that direction," Robert explained. "Before you reach that turn. On the straight road out——"

"Oh! Yes. White house," was the exasperating reply of well assumed misunderstanding. "Abel Ayer did own that place. Tighter'n a bark to a tree, he was. Well off, too. They went, he and his wife, out West once; drove their own team; and I declare for't, if they

didn't brag it only cost 'em a New England nine-pence and a skein of silk. Begged their way, I s'pose. He's dead. His son-in-law, Josiah Barnes, lives there now. He's a good deal like his pa-in-law in some ways. When the old man died, Josiah charged all the relatives, and everybody who eat supper after the funeral, twenty-five cents apiece."

"You are on the wrong track again," Robert declared a little impatiently. "The place I refer to is a well-kept farm, somewhat hilly, a red brick house——"

"Oh! I know now. That's Eben Hathaway's. Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy. Every one calls 'em that. Uncle Eben's the nicest man ever lived; honest and generous as the day is long; but he's pretty sot if you run agin his likes and dislikes, specially on orthodoxy. Dreadful sot on such things, Eben is."

Robert made a mental note of donning piety.

"I went out last year to buy a colt," Hiram went on. "He asked too much. He knew he did. But he had set the price and wouldn't move a peg, till Aunt Nancy come out kinder cherry like, and helped us through with the trade. Aunt Nancy's kinder short and plump, and don't have so many pesky narves as Eben. She's mostly easy-like except on one p'int. She wants Esther to give up her high-flown notions, as she calls 'em, marry by and by, and settle down into sort of a dray woman, if the term expresses the idea."

"Esther is the daughter, I conclude," Robert remarked.

"Oh, no, no, no! Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy buried their three children long ago. Dreadful blow it was. Only a few years apart. Very bright children. Broke Eben all up. We old ones know what gave Eben the narves, and never lay anything up agin him. Esther's his niece. You see, Old Squire Hathaway had two

children, Eben and Marthy. Marthy was Esther's mother. Eben was born a farmer, and a genuine Yankee like us old ones. Marthy grew up as sweet and delicate as a primrose. Pretty? Wall, the young ones think Esther must be the beautifulest. She's as like her mother as two peas; but we old ones swear by Marthy. We all took a turn at the game of the moth and candle; some of us got pretty well singed, too. But a young Mather, Alanson Mather, come up from the city, and that ended the tale for all of us. No descendant of Cotton, I guess. Old Cotton Mather must have been a dreadful uncomfortable critter to live with accordin' to history. Some folks work so busy crucifying their own flesh, they crucify everybody else. He was one o' them kind, I hear lately. That ain't gospel accordin' to my reckonin'. He——"

"Then Esther's father's name was Alanson Mather," Robert suggested.

"That's it," Hiram asserted, without recognizing Robert's skillful switch. "A smart, spruce lookin' chap he was, too. Wall, they naturally got married and went off to the city. But 'Lanson lived only a few years. Of course he'd only just got nicely started in his profession, he was a lawyer, and so didn't leave much. The old Squire, Marthy's father, had died, leavin' Eben the farm, thinkin' Marthy was finely fixed. Well, Marthy took what property she had and her baby, little Esther, and come right to Eben's. He was married then to Nancy Gilman, one of the town girls. Then Marthy died. Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy took Esther and brought her up. You see the Hathaway line runs way back a hundred and fifty years before the Revolution. Good stock. Parsons and scholars scattered along the way, with doctors and aristocrats thrown in. Pretty smart, likely fellers

among 'em, too, I guess. I s'pose Esther takes back to some or all of 'em. She's a born aristocrat in some ways. Tall and so stylish lookin', and proud and dignified. But she don't know it. Her ways have a grace and touch different from the other girls, but they're just as sweet and winnin' as can be; modest and shy, and they keep her toler'ble secluded. Sings like a bird, and has quite a talent for paintin', I hear. That troubles Aunt Nancy. 'Marster good woman, Aunt Nancy is. When any one is sick——"

"Then she does not wholly appreciate the fine arts," Robert put in.

"Wall, as I was goin' to say, she has her peculiarities. She has a pretty strong New England doctrine that work is the salvation of yer soul. She's had to be a little close from necessity, and I guess the greatest objection to Esther's paintin' is because she thinks she can't afford the time. They both worship the girl, but sometimes you know we worship folks a le-e-tle more when they go just accordin' to our pattern. Esther can't help her love of what is pretty, and any smart girl likes furbelows, but she and Aunt Nancy don't always agree on that question."

"I heartily thank you, Mr. Foss," Robert said, hastily rising. "I have been very pleasantly entertained. I will see you again."

"You're welcome," Hiram sincerely returned. "Always glad to accommodate a stranger. I s'pose you never heard about 'Lijah Penniman comin' from Californy?"

"No."

"Quite an episode. Then there's old Samanthy Grey; how she was took with rheumatism; and——"

"I shall have to leave you now," Robert declared, cordially extending his hand. "Good-night."

"Well! Success attended my efforts to-night," Robert mused, as he speedily made his way to the street for a short exercise. When just opposite the village church, which was lighted, he met Esther at the turn of the walk leading to it.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said, politely raising his hat, "may I inquire if there are services here to-night? I am a stranger, and thought I would like to attend if there were."

"This is only our choir rehearsal," the girl simply said, as with a bow and smile she passed on.

After an extended stroll of deep meditation, Robert returned to his room to add a postscript to his letter. It ran thus:—"Can't stop to write it all over. Thought I saw a genuine wood-nymph this afternoon, but later found she was a very much alive young woman. And what a glorious woman she will develop into! Have engaged my room another week. You know, Dick, that soon—that I—I do not need to mention it. Try me once more, Dick. Everything will be all right. This will reach you at 11 A.M. to-morrow, Saturday. Take the 1 P.M. train up without fail. Will meet you at the station. Come. This is a woman's postscript—longer than the original letter.

"Find out what you can about Mary."

CHAPTER III.

IN the distance a line of mountains tipped with shifting lights beneath a pale sapphire sky. Below them, guarded on the hither side by a range of uneven hills the broad valley stretched away, a warm haze softening the vivid green of meadows and brightening the fallow fields. Scattered here and there were patches of shadow in contrast with flickering sunlight, while over all hovered a radiant beauty of peace and content.

Robert Leighton admired the scene with æsthetic taste. Beauty seldom escaped him. Yet, all this throbbing of the silent forces of nature paled in comparison with the touch of life before him, which made the picture perfect and compelled him to halt in a moment of indecision.

Just within the entrance of the arbor where he hoped to find her, Esther was busily at work with her crayons. She was so engrossed with the pleasure, that she was unaware of Robert's presence until he snapped a twig a few feet from her easel. Startled, she turned, a deep blush covering her face at sight of the stranger casually met the night before.

"Again I must beg your pardon," Robert said, with one of his frank smiles, and well assumed surprise, touching his hat with a polished air as he adroitly presented his card. "This is Miss Mather, I believe."

"It is," was the reply, full of wonder.

"I was intending to find you at your home," Robert said. "Hiram Foss recommended you as competent to paint a flower piece I should like. He would introduce me if I had not accidentally found you."

The lie slipped easily from Robert's tongue.

"Hiram's introduction entitles you to a cordial reception," Esther replied, rising, and giving her hand in welcome, "but his recommendation of my services may need questioning," she smiled.

Robert's order gave him a moment's perplexity in the choice of flower to be selected, then he said: "When the flower is in bloom I would like a cluster of blue gentians. I leave their arrangement and price with you. I see I have stumbled upon an artist's studio," he went on easily, glad to drift from the order given. Do you ever admit visitors? Especially when they come uninvited?"

"I have never been honored with uninvited guests," was the answer, with a bit of shyness in the tone. "Perhaps," she added brightly, "because only a few know about the place. People never suspect it is a retreat of budding genius," she laughingly ended.

"It is certainly a delightful place," Robert enthusiastically replied, critically examining it. "Decidedly original."

"It does have that virtue," Esther acknowledged, regaining her easy manner. "Possibly, because it is mostly nature's handiwork. Masses of vines will in time fashion a roof; but just now that indispensable article is the overlapping of trees, as you see, making a rather lofty ceiling. For tapestried walls," she went on mirthfully, "I have blossoms. Knotted, unhewn sticks supporting them answer for Japanese screens, and the colors of Venetian silks are in the petals and branches and leaves.

You will observe I am not wholly ignorant of the proper furnishings of an artist's sanctum."

"This far surpasses any I have seen." The words rang with sincerity as Robert looked straight into the honest eyes, and noted their swift change to seriousness.

"As you are here, and have given an order, although a stranger," Esther began with evident hesitation, "I really would like an opinion upon this portrait from your unprejudiced judgment."

Embarrassment was readily lost in earnestness, as she arranged the easel in a better light and produced her two wooden chairs. Robert threw down his fishing-rod, having entirely forgotten to use it as a means of introduction or an excuse for his intrusion, and gladly accepted the honor of critic thus thrust upon him.

"It is now my turn to beg pardon," Esther admitted with heightened color, as the two sat down with the gravity of connoisseurs at an art exhibition. "But for your remark last evening I should hardly venture to trouble a stranger, even though your opinion would be more correct than flattery of friends. The truth is, I am very anxious about this, and as the whole affair is a secret I have been obliged to battle alone with doubts and misgivings. There have been a few severe contests between actual ability and attempted ideals," she ended mischievously.

"You must remember I have never seen the original," Robert reminded.

Esther replied by handing him a photograph. "I cannot have Auntie as a regular model, since it is to be a surprise."

"They are wonderfully alike," Robert thoughtfully said, repressing an exclamation of surprise at the un-

usually good work displayed in expression. "I believe there is a disagreement among artists," he went on in his free, attractive way, "whether faces tell true tales, or only one's aspirations or want of them. Desires and possibilities so often clash. It is easy to see they might produce lines which would mislead one. This portrait certainly represents a fine character. At least you have depicted it as such; kind, generous, sympathetic. Allow me to congratulate you on your success."

"It is my Aunt Nancy," Esther replied, her pleasure at the verdict shining in her eyes. "It is to be a surprise on her birthday. She is a dear soul, with most of the virtues and few of the faults. Her affection is deep, though reserved. That characteristic caused some tears in childhood. I have made an attempt to study the soul of my subject; a maxim which our teacher was always holding up to us with threatening forefinger. Though imperfectly done, it has revealed to me Aunt Nancy's good qualities as nothing else could. If I have succeeded in bringing them out, the effort is not wholly a failure."

"On the contrary it is a triumph. But I was not aware that Eaton furnished advantages for such studies."

"It does not. I attended the Academy in Hillester two years. I fear, however," she added with a tinge of sadness clouding the animated face, "my efforts hereafter will be mere practice in the little I have learned."

"You already have a creditable display," Robert encouraged, turning to another canvas, representing Uncle Eben's honest face. "Considerable firmness there," he ventured, remembering Hiram Foss's account of that special characteristic. "Quite decided in opinions and tenacious of them. Good qualities if the opinions happen to be right—in accordance with our own, I suppose that amounts to," he smiled. "You certainly have the

happy faculty of getting behind your pictures, as one of our great painters calls it," he went on, picking up a small but striking landscape. "It is a great gift. In that I venture to assert you have distanced your teacher. In color and technique he is, of course, your superior as yet; but you need better instruction."

For a moment Esther did not reply. She was thinking that she was talking almost confidentially with a stranger. Yet he did not seem like a stranger he was so frank in conversation, so anxious to please, and so courteous in his ways. Meanwhile, he was intent on the changing gleams of her face and the depths of her eyes.

Then the conversation wandered to other topics. Robert delighted in the enthusiasm created by his recital of scenes enjoyed in foreign lands, and of the pleasures of society.

"It must be so beautiful," Esther observed in one of the pauses. "I wish I might conquer—not the earth with arms like Alexander," she laughed. "I am not warlike; but a world of obstacles. It must be grand to have the power of expressing the music of the masters, ever lifting one's hearers up, and still farther up, with the melody; or to charm with beauty depicted with the glow of one's thoughts; to be one of a brilliant, eager throng, in a whirl of success and happiness. Uncle Eben declares that to be unholy ambition," she added, "while Aunt Nancy maintains it is downright vanity which must be crucified; that the Lord knew such a position was not for the welfare of my soul, and so withheld it."

Robert's mind grasped the chord of the unheard music ringing through her soul, lending so much grace to the responsive face. He smiled as he thought how little Esther knew of the untiring, discouraging work required to achieve acknowledgment due real talent. He

also knew that wealth would unlock many of the doors through which she wished to pass; and he rejoiced that he possessed the wealth.

However, he did not give expression to any of this wisdom. Instead, he carelessly said, "The peaceful, restful life in your quiet Eaton is one of its greatest charms. If anything would soothe a disturbed mind or worn out body, this fresh air and these shady nooks would certainly do it. You do not appreciate your inheritance, perhaps. Such things make one grow better; they instill high resolutions. There is one particular spot farther up this very brook, where the lights and shadows and repose are unlike anything I have seen, with one exception. That is the burial place of the Taj Mahal; and this has the advantage that the natural always has over the artificial. Have you ever read about the Taj Mahal?"

Questioning, eager eyes were his answer.

"It is the most beautiful and costly mausoleum in the world," he went on, watching the almost wistful longing of the expressive face, "a glittering mass of marble, mosaics, and jewels, enclosed in a garden of fountains and flowers. I can give no adequate description of its gorgeous magnificence. I went two hundred miles out of my way to see it. It is in Agra, India. It was built by Shah Jehan, one of the greatest of the old Mogul emperors in memory of his wife, who was his idol; it is a memorial of his great love for her. In the inmost sanctuary, where the two tombs are, just the right measure of light is so softened and eloquent, that, as a writer expresses it, 'you feel that you are in a place where the voice should only whisper, and the feet take slow and gentle steps.'"

"One might die for such love as that," Esther

breathed. "What must it be to die and leave it, never to know it any more!"

There was no self-consciousness in the remark. Her voice, her earnestness, everything contradicted the idea. Yet, when she glanced up and found Robert's eyes fastened upon her in unmistakable admiration, a crimson tide flooded throat and brow.

"Esther! Esther!" called a clear, pleasant voice.

"It is Auntie calling me," Esther exclaimed, brought back to present surroundings and springing up.

"I am sure I have detained you," Robert lamented, also rising and assisting in the care of the portraits. "I shall wish to become acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Hathaway; also to learn how the birthday gift is received, with their permission, of course, and yours," he added.

"I think they will be granted," Esther replied. "That is our house," pointing to it.

"And the path around the turn?" Robert asked, remembering it was the one she took the day before.

"That leads to another point in the road; a short cut to the home of a friend. I must go now," extending her hand in adieu. "Thank you for your kindness and interest. Good-evening."

Within the friendly shelter of trees, Robert watched his new acquaintance till she joined Aunt Nancy and both entered the house. Consulting his watch, he uttered an exclamation of surprise at the lateness of the hour. Hastily gathering up his fishing tackle he strode rapidly across the lots to the tavern, a frown growing deeper as he neared his destination. At supper the guests wondered at the unusual silence of the light-hearted young man, whose intelligent conversation and ready repartee they had come to expect. Unmindful of

their curiosity, he heard nothing of the talk about him, till a chance remark informed him of his mistake in the arrival of the train. He left the meal unfinished, snatched his hat, and in the door met Richard Benson.

"Dear Dick!" he exclaimed in surprise. "A stupid blunder in looking at the time table accounts for this," he said, really annoyed. "I will order supper for you——"

"I had it at the station below here," Richard interrupted, "where we left the express for the snail. You expected me, then?"

"Of course I did."

"Yes, of course you did after that letter. Well, I propose we take a walk and look things over. My luggage will be sent up all right. You engaged my room?"

"Yes. Everything is arranged."

Robert led the way up a hill, which not only gave them seclusion, but also a view sufficiently fine to pay for the labor of gaining it.

"Robert," Richard said when they had reached the top, "there is no record that a certain historical personage never took ordinary mortals up a mountain to show them the glories of the earth, when he wished to enlist them under his banner; therefore, we can take it for granted that he did. If he has been instructing you on my account, I warn you he has reckoned without his host this time. The view is enchanting; but if you could give me all its glories, I would not follow you in this. What is the name of this young lady?" he bluntly inquired.

"Her name is Esther Mather."

"You cannot have progressed very far in the acquaintance?"

"No, not as yet."

"You must not."

"I shall if I can, Dick. I made a vow yesterday."

"H'm-n."

"Of course I have faults. Every one has; but cannot they be corrected?"

"A leopard cannot change his spots, Robert. In nine cases out of ten he wouldn't if he could. I fear yours would not be the tenth case."

"You are frank, to say the least. You must remember a few of the good things, Dick, while you are taking inventory. First I have wealth."

"Too much."

"Even you cannot deny I am generous with it."

"Too free in some things."

Robert winced.

"And money will not feed a hungry heart," Richard went on. "The girl may have one. Ask yourself the plain question, if you are not inclined to be harsh unless your own wishes are yielded to. Tastes sometimes clash. I do not need to mention to what I refer."

"I told you I had made a vow."

"Very well. Keep it. As yet the young lady is ignorant of your designs. She may always be. If I remember correctly I have heard ravings before over a pretty face. Your ecstasies have sometimes been fickle. Besides, she may have a word in the negative to say for herself. At any rate," Richard ended decidedly, "the matter must go no further."

"Soon," Robert stammered, "soon—well, everything will be all right."

"Robert, it can never be all right. Do listen to reason," Richard implored. "Have I not been your friend? Have I not watched over you and helped you these many years? I am older than you; and have loved you in spite of everything. I have been determined not to lose

confidence in you; you are young yet; but I cannot go to her father——”

“She has none,” Robert interrupted. “She lives with Uncle Eben.”

“Uncle Eben! Has it come to that?”

“Oh, no.” There was petulance in the tone. “I have never seen the man. His name is Hathaway. Everybody calls him Uncle Eben, that is all.”

“Well, Uncle Eben it is then. I cannot go to him and tell him you are not good enough for his niece.”

“If you do I shall go straight to the——”

“Never mind, Robert, where you will go. What I fear is you will go if I don’t. After all, I may be crossing the bridge before I reach it. I must see the girl first.”

“That you can do to-morrow. She sings soprano, in the church choir, and, of course, will be at the service.”

“Are you going to church?”

“Certainly.”

“Robert, don’t be a hypocrite. Show your colors. Don’t pose for a saint when you are a sinner.”

“Isn’t going to church a good starting point on a new road?”

“Yes, Robert, it is. I will go with you. At what hour is the service?”

“I understand the resident clergyman is indisposed, which prevents a morning service,” Robert explained. “A supply comes from Hillester at four in the afternoon.”

“I will be ready,” Richard promised, expecting that during the interval Robert would suddenly inform him in an easy, off-hand way, that he had decided not to attend the service. Instead, he was so prompt that

they reached the church at an early hour, and were waiting in the vestibule when Uncle Eben arrived.

Uncle Eben gave the strangers a keen, sidewise glance. He liked the younger one, so bonny with his bright face, and dark eyes. "As for the older one," he communed with himself, "he's a sartin pillar of uprightness if he ain't a member," and straightway extended to them an invitation to share his pew. "Nancy, my wife, is kept at home to-day with the cheese," he added, "and as Little Queen sings there's plenty of room."

The invitation was readily accepted. Robert congratulated himself on the success of the manœuvre, for Uncle Eben's pew had been the strategic point fought for; he had about exhausted excuses for declining other courteous invitations.

The village of Eaton supported but one church. As a rule the different sects worshipped together in a friendly spirit, occasionally exchanging the denomination of their ministers to assist in keeping the peace; but if sometimes a spell of doctrine seized one with an unusually hard grip, he would seek a neighboring church till the spasm worked off, then return with courage renewed. Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy, however, never deserted the home sanctuary. If by chance any text was expounded contrary to their belief, they would close their ears as much as possible, sometimes their eyes, and silently pray for the conviction of the speaker. In such a state of affairs, if Uncle Eben's inward wrestling was so prolonged as to cause a nod, Aunt Nancy was ready with a pinch, lest the good people should interpret it to be an affirmative response; at the signal Uncle Eben would straighten up with great dignity and wide-open eyes.

On this day they were to listen to a Mr. Hallam, who

was a favorite with all. He had the happy faculty of brushing against no one's creed, but sublimely rising to a plane above them all, carrying his hearers with him. His unstudied eloquence touched hidden kernels of intellect, which quickly glowed under the moment's inspiration but which circumstances had forbidden full fruition, and thus each one would feel the satisfaction that his own special faith had been administered to.

A large congregation was expected. At the call of the bell, which bore on its surface the names of the makers, Paul Revere and Son, and which the inhabitants declared had a patriotic tone of its own, the men came in reverently from their harmless gossip on the green without, the women hushed a neighborly exchange of good cheer, the young girls fluttered in with airy muslins and merry faces, while the children stoically settled down to the proper decorum of the old-time New England Sabbath, still observed in Eaton. Richard and Robert enjoyed their new experience in the little country church. The light might be a trifle too glaring, but the sincere, unconventional atmosphere was delicious.

When the organ ceased its jubilant swell of invitation, softening into a low murmur, their eyes suddenly lost their power of vision. They no longer saw; only heard, as the clear flute-like notes warbled from a young girl's throat, which bubbled from a heart still rich in faith that the world was as true and sweet as itself; mellowed with a touch of sanctity befitting the words, and unconsciously vibrating with a thirst for power.

During the search for the lesson after the short prayer following the solo, Richard wrote on a slip of paper and handed to Robert: "Her voice is charming, and with proper training will make a mark not to be despised; but it has not quite enough strength and range neces-

sary to bring 'the world at her feet,' as you might say. Now, it is a voice as yet untouched by passion or sorrow; a voice of great sweetness. Love will give it a fuller tone and expression; sorrow, a depth of pathos that would be irresistible; but would it pay her—the latter? Do you wish to aid in such a transformation?"

Robert gave a condescending smile as he crushed the paper in time to drop an offering on the contribution plate, then he settled back to listen patiently to the sermon, the first one heard in years.

Mr. Hallam's sermons were short and incisive; possibly he had in mind Samuel Weller's maxim for letter writing.

"The great art o' letter writin'," Sammy explained to his father, "is to stop when they vish there vas more." A similar feeling throbbed through the congregation when the discourse was somewhat abruptly ended.

Uncle Eben's desire for extended blessing, however, was seriously disturbed.

A few primitive customs of worship were retained, along with the old-fashioned interior. One of these was the turning of the congregation during the singing of the last hymn, so as to face the choir in the gallery behind them; a sort of division of honors between the allied forces of Israel. The good man was much perturbed lest ignorance of this on the part of his guests should cause them some embarrassment, so little versed was he in the quick perception and easy adjustment to circumstances of society's devotees. He fidgetted till the reading of the last stanza was begun, when he confidentially whispered what would be expected of them. He would have been alarmed could he have heard the fervent, responsive "Amen" silently breathed by both his

new acquaintances, lest their religious zeal outstripped his own.

Richard, being too well bred to turn and stare at her, had not as yet seen Esther. When the proud, bright beauty of her winsome face struck him full in the eye he wondered if his own heart were not touched; still greater was the wonder if Robert's had really been awakened; at times he had almost despaired of his friend's possession of such an organ. Then, when he noticed the vivid blush as for a moment Esther's eyes met Robert's earnest ones, he knew he had come none too soon. Further mischief must be stopped. But how?

The remainder of the hymn and the benediction following it were unheard, amid the struggle of possibilities within himself. Full consciousness of surroundings were only realized when he found himself again in the vestibule. Esther, radiant, stood before him, and Uncle Eben was laboring diffidently through introductions.

"I had the pleasure, Mr. Hathaway, of accidentally meeting your niece yesterday," Robert explained in his frank, easy way. Suddenly remembering the portrait might also be a secret from Uncle Eben, he stammered something about fishing along the brook, and adroitly appropriated the old man as they left the church, leaving Richard to follow with Esther.

It was a pleasant evening. The mellow lights and shades, the soft, delicious air and restful calm, soothed one into hallowed content. Before a dozen rods were traversed, hospitable Uncle Eben had invited his companions to accompany him home.

Esther wondered at the new exhilaration now become a part of herself, while Uncle Eben was charmed with a young man who could talk understandingly of Alder-

neys, Jerseys, and be so thoroughly interested in the state of his crops after the drouth.

When Robert skillfully told of his pleasure in listening to Esther's musical voice, and hinted of a knowledge on his part of her greater possibilities as an artist, Uncle Eben's confidence was won. He acknowledged that their desire to give her advantages had been so great they had mortgaged the farm for a sum necessary for one year's instruction; that they were in sore straits about it, and she would listen to nothing further of the kind.

Robert was quick in conclusions, especially when his own wishes were in the balance. He seemed to lose interest in Esther, and questioned the availabilities for investing capital in that neighborhood.

"I never risk large sums in new enterprises," he said, after a moment of silence, "but I have noticed a huckleberry field on your place which might be made profitable. I have been thinking of dipping into agriculture." The statement caused no blush of conscience. "We city people are only too glad to obtain fresh fruit. I will tell you what I will do, Mr. Hathaway. I will give you \$500, and we will be partners in a huckleberry scheme."

It might as well have been cabbages or wheat, only berries came first to mind.

"You, of course, will have the oversight of the culture and markets," Robert went on, as coolly as if a fortune lay in an Eaton field, "and we will share the profits equally. That will pay off your mortgage and start the business. I want you to pay the mortgage first, so as to have your mind free from worry. The best success in any undertaking is attained by an unharassed mind."

The lines in Uncle Eben's face lessened. "You make a flattering offer, Mr. Leighton," was the reply. "To-

day is the Sabbath-day, and it is not seemly to discuss it now; but, if you will come to me early to-morrow morning, I will show you how there will be more chances of failure than success, and advise you better."

When, later, Richard was informed of the prospective plans, he said: "Robert, you must leave this place with me to-morrow."

"Dick, I shall not," was the firm reply. "Remember, please, that though I make a confidant of you, and come to you in penitent confession, I am still my own master."

"Why do you wish to make this girl unhappy?"

"I have no such wishes, Dick. But I'm off to bed. Good-night."

A few hours of sleepless thought convinced Richard that in this matter his influence over Robert would be of no avail. While he was struggling over duty, he at last fell into a dreamless sleep, to be awakened by a loud knocking at his door.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Robert."

"What's the matter?"

"It's five o'clock."

"Well, what of it? Even in this benighted land of early breakfasts one is allowed a little more slumber. Please do not hammer any more."

"I came to say I am going over to Uncle Eben's——"

"Yes. I understand. I overheard that arrangement. Just remember I am not in the huckleberry business. Don't run away with yourself, though. Dick is here yet."

"I'll be back in time to breakfast with you," Robert promised and was off.

Aunt Nancy was in quite a flutter of curiosity when

she beheld the strange young man sitting quite at home on the woodpile, and earnestly engaged in conversation with Uncle Eben. She skimmed her milk and prepared her breakfast, yet the low hum of voices outside went on. Just as her patience was nearly exhausted and the pancakes spoiled, Robert took a speedy departure, while Uncle Eben rushed in with considerable force. Something must have blinded him, for he stumbled over the dog, stepped on the cat's tail, and upset Aunt Nancy's pot of cream.

"Eben, what is the trouble?" Aunt Nancy inquired, alarmed. "You can't help being a little man, and wiry, but you can keep from being so fidgetty."

"An excess of joy, Nancy. That's all. Mortgage paid off to-day. New partnership formed. Who wouldn't be hilarious?" Then he presented the case with much exuberation.

"Eben Hathaway! And you a member!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed when he had finished. "And he a city man, too, taking advantage of his ignorance!"

"Wall, if he wants to plant his money in a huckleberry lot, it may as well be mine as anybody's. He's to take his pay in berries along, after they get started, for what the mortgage comes to."

"Do you remember you have a conscience, Eben, even if it is slumbering?"

"No danger of forgettin' that, Nancy. It bothers pesky consider'ble at times; but you know I allus foller it, if I do sometimes jog along behind toler'ble slow."

"Pa!"

"I explained it all," Uncle Eben went on meekly. "I told him the money would never sprout, to say nothin' of good firm roots. I pointed out the risks and delays and uncertain crops; but the more I said the more eager

he was to get rid of that five hundred dollars. He don't value it more than we do one. What troubles me," the shrewd little man added, rubbing his head for assistance, "is to find out where I've been taken in. I've got the check in my pocket and have signed no papers; but I can't quite see into it."

Light suddenly dawned on Aunt Nancy's understanding.

"Men are obtuse creatures," she answered with superiority. "It may be Esther," she whispered.

"Like enough. If he's what Esther's lover ought to be, he need not try to buy me. Esther would settle that. If he is not, this is a business transaction," Uncle Eben announced with a lofty air, "and he ought to lose his money for his impudence."

"Robert," Richard said, as the two were leaving the latter's room for breakfast, "a word from me would put an end to berries and all. Do not compel me to say it."

"Dick," was the cool reply, "when I sent the note it was really the girl. But, honest, it is huckleberries now. You have often wished me to do something, and I take a fancy to this. Really enthusiastic over it; and it will help Uncle Eben, anyway, so good will come from it."

"And you promise me you will not try to make the girl care for you?" Remember, she knows nothing of the world, and you can excel if you choose in ways unknown to country lads."

"Well, I promise, Dick," was the reply.

It was the first deliberate falsehood Robert had ever uttered to his friend and benefactor; and so mysterious are the hidden springs which control affections, and so alluring is the siren voice of hope, that Richard trusted once more, and only replied: "Beneath this girl's love

of gayety and splendor is an earnest soul. It will develop slowly or rapidly, as the case may be, in a new environment, but develop it will, as surely as a certain seed produces a certain plant. How would you meet it?"

Robert shrugged his shoulders and passed on without replying.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Richard Benson came to Eaton he intended to return to New York the following Monday. He was prepared for a short infatuation on the part of Robert; though he half believed it might die of assiduous cultivation before he reached him; in that case no harm would result to any one. He was glad he found affairs no more serious, for he well understood Robert's unyielding will, when a project was once earnestly considered for his own pleasure; also, his disregard of consequences if he only attained it; his faults were all known to this staunch friend.

For some reason unexplained to his satisfaction, Richard had learned to like Robert when he was a lad. He had persistently and conscientiously lectured him on the wisdom necessary for a young man to possess, and the best paths in life for him to follow. Although his pupil did not readily tread the ways pointed out, his own affections became strongly entwined about him. And through all the trials and disappointments he had learned that Robert came to him as father confessor; sometimes penitently, oftener not, but in this one respect he never questioned his sincerity and truth.

Many times Richard had trembled with this responsibility, lest by some word or advice or interference, both his affection and conscience might suffer remorse. If Robert should determine to win the heart of Esther

Mather, he was well equipped with means of fascination when he chose to employ them. Richard saw that Esther was charmed with his polished, courteous ways, which formed a striking contrast to the homespun manners of the village folk. He knew she was too inexperienced to realize that a true heart might beat under the one rather than the other, and that she did not see things as they were; a glamor of romance covered them with a halo; and the most dangerous shoal of all was her love of the outside world, and her eagerness to enter it.

For her sake he must remain and await the development of circumstances. Besides, he was nothing loth to tarry a month, if need be, in this delightfully quaint and honest New England town. As for the people among whom he was so suddenly thrown, they soon learned to like this new visitor with a different feeling of appreciation from that given to Robert. They might turn to Robert for amusement, they secretly admired him; but in Richard they unerringly felt a genial warmth, a glow from the heart the other did not possess.

As the days passed, Richard was often surprised at the change in Robert. He seemed to have dropped a cynical view of life very undesirable to become planted in one so young; and certain aims hitherto scoffed at as priggish had assumed wonderful virtues. Could it be that a love for this proud, beautiful girl might be the one anchor which would lead him to abandon his wandering life, and to use his powers of mind and his wealth for good to himself and others? Was it love? Or only pride in her beauty and talent? Robert's likes and dislikes were usually of a facile nature. Perhaps a few more days would adjust the matter without any regrets.

It was almost dusk, when for the one hundredth time during the day Richard had gone over this perplexing

reasoning; then, for consolation and with a determination to render aid in whatever seemed for the best, he was soon on his way to Uncle Eben's. As he drew near he could hear Esther's laugh, full of mirth and music, and Robert's voice relating one of his many humorous experiences, as they sat chatting on the piazza. Both faces brightened with welcome when he joined them and accepted the offer of the most comfortable chair.

"I was just telling Miss Mather," Robert remarked, "that I never realized there were so much brain, and really keen insight into the philosophy of things, underlying some of the quaint, old-fashioned New England people. I am in danger of being convinced that double negatives do not make an affirmative, grammarians to the contrary notwithstanding. As for tenses of verbs, they are utterly a waste of time; and the agreement in number of subject and predicate should be a matter of taste. Customs, and the fine work of somebody, sometime, who had nothing more important to do, studied out the rules for other's speech. It is the idea you want; the kernel back of it."

Richard listened, remembering unkind, even cruel words, because a certain person's English was not quite elegant; the same reminiscence occurred to Robert, and for an instant their eyes met, while Esther blithely answered: "You have an original way of apologizing for them. I enjoy a little of the oddity myself. Aunt Nancy has the greatest struggle with final g's. Occasionally she rounds out a sentence with flourishes and vanity over her triumphs in that line; often, in shame that they entirely slipped her memory. Is not that true, Aunt, dear?" she questioned, as Aunt Nancy came placidly out, followed by Uncle Eben.

"I don't dare say yes or no, child," Aunt Nancy re-

turned, with great pride in her eyes as she gave Esther a caress in passing. "Girls don't always see with wisdom's eyes. I'm not goin'—going to be caught in a trap."

A general laugh followed Aunt Nancy's correction.

"We were really discussing the possibilities here in Eaton for artists," Robert began, "though perhaps we wandered from the topic. Not to mention your charming bits of landscape, and sunsets with colors that would be the distraction of any painter, there is much individual character. I was just advising your niece to try her skill with Hiram Foss."

"The girl wastes too much time now," Aunt Nancy suggested.

"Cultivating the best in one, Mrs. Hathaway, is only being just to one's self," Robert solemnly announced. When had he thus turned preacher! "And Hiram is so picturesque, the typical long, lank Yankee," he went on cheerily. "He represents their firm adherence to the little red schoolhouse in his bright, intelligent face; and he certainly has always followed the Bible's injunction, 'Take no thought for the morrow,' thus embodying a Puritan idea of stern religious principles; and his dress, though not in just their style, absolutely proclaims their crucifixion of pride. His vest actually shrinks in shame at the length of coattails and shortcomings of trousers."

"Tut, tut," Uncle Eben broke in. "You must not slander my ancestors; besides, you must always speak reverently of religious faith, if it don't keep in fashion."

"That's just it, Mr. Hathaway. It don't keep in fashion. Therefore, how do we know any of it will be steadfast?" Robert questioned.

"Well, they believed it and lived up to it. It is not becomin' in us to belittle conscience."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hathaway," Robert penitently apologized, touched at the fine expression of the face as Uncle Eben uttered the words. "I intended no disrespect to either Puritan or creed. Perhaps my words were not well chosen. Really, though," tenaciously clinging to the first topic under consideration, "Mr. Foss, with his curious mixture of apparel and quaint corners of character, would be good on canvas, if executed by a real artist. Label him, 'The Chronicle of the Ages.'"

"Poh!" Uncle Eben earnestly exclaimed, a cloud caused by Robert's levity passing away. "Painter fellows don't want us homely folks, even if we do have a few virtues and good looks. They prefer silks and satins and fandangles."

"Not always," Robert maintained. "The finest figure and the most beautiful face I ever saw, with one or two exceptions," he added, giving Esther a swift, sidewise glance, "were those of a Breton fisher-girl. The painting was at a Paris exhibition, and made the reputation of the artist. She was sculling a large boat with a heavy oar as easily as if it were a light paddle. The waves were strong, too. It was a magnificent representation of her superb strength, and every line was grace itself. She wore the peasant dress, somewhat tattered and faded, but you forgot that in looking at her eyes. A beautiful love shot through their glance. I was told a sad history in connection with it, which I believe has been put in story. She learned to love the artist, who cared for nothing but his art. This love, which was as pure as the most delicately reared maiden's, and her marvelous beauty helped him to produce a picture which made him famous. He was an honest man, upright enough—I saw him once—but supremely selfish. He suddenly left the place never to return. The blow coming quite unex-

pectedly set the girl's brain on fire. During a severe storm the same night, she went out in the very boat in which she had so often posed beaming with happiness, and was drowned."

At the close of the recital Richard saw a mist gather in Esther's eyes, while the exquisitely curved lips of her proud, sensitive mouth visibly trembled.

"Such gifts are intoxicatin', just like old wine," Uncle Eben reasoned, slowly shaking his head in emphasis. "They lead to heartlessness for others and vanity and vexation of spirit for one's self. They should be suppressed or turned into better channels. After all, poverty may sometimes be a blessing," he ended, looking at Esther.

"But you must remember, Mr. Hathaway," Robert persisted, "that sweeping accusations are hardly just; that even the truth of accepted religious history receives added power under the hand of a genius."

"This man of whom you have been speaking would have been selfish and cruel under any circumstances," Esther declared. There was a ring of decision beneath the tremor of her voice which astonished her hearers. "It was not because he had talent," she went on in clear tones. "The gift of song or art need not make one vain, or anything that is not noble. The orator thrills to his finger-tips with passion for his subject; the clergyman with the principle so vital to his special faith. May not their satisfaction of success, at least partly, arise from the fact of being able to unfold to others some of the beauties they see? Need it all be vanity of their own powers? To nurture which others must be crushed? It is the same with music and art; their lovers discern things hidden from others. Is there any wrong in a just pride of being able to reveal them? It is exhilarating to

be honored for what you can do by force of work aided by a little talent. I would not wish to be cruel or selfish; but I would sacrifice much to——”

Though the words had been poured forth in a torrent, the sentence was left unfinished, as the girl turned her face to hide the tears in her eyes. The ideas were unexpected from one gently bred in seclusion.

“My child!” Aunt Nancy exclaimed, “where did you get such high-flown notions? and above your station. They must have come from reading so many books,” remembering Esther’s well-filled little book-case. Aunt Nancy had examined them once, but could get no light from the instruction about “octaves and pianissimos, and adagios, to say nothing about rules for breathing, and suggestions for producing tints rivaling the rainbow.”

“Ma, the child comes honestly by them,” Uncle Eben interposed. “Her mother right over again. She loved splendor and beauty everywhere, in her clothes and surroundings as well as in her disposition. I wish we could do more for the Little Queen.”

Richard remained silent; but he feared the girl had thus unconsciously placed the weapon of her own destiny in the hands of the enemy; while Robert gave an exultant smile as he accepted it, already preparing to give it an edge to sunder all obstacles in the way.

“Well,” Aunt Nancy placidly announced, “we’re gettin’—getting—too serious. Let us have some cheery music—that common folks can understand. Did you bring your guitar, Mr. Leighton?”

“I did, Mrs. Hathaway. Here it is,” and Robert was busy trying the strings. He was a passable accompanist for simple ballads, and soon the rest were listening to “Robin Adair.” Rousing patriotic music followed, for echoes of the great civil war yet sounded through the

land. Then came the song, "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming," adapted from trio to duet. Esther's voice had been well trained as far as instruction had proceeded. She rendered the notes with charming inflection and expression; but Richard rejoiced that as yet there was still wanting that subtle, magic spell, given only after love has touched the heart. As a finale to the pleasure, Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy were persuaded to join in the good old ringing tune of Coronation, and the hour ended in affectionate farewells, untroubled by any previous disturbance.

Many a delightful evening was thus enjoyed. But not all the enchantment of those summer days was bequeathed by the witchery of twilight hours. Not a few mornings found Richard and Robert out early in the fresh sunlight, the clear air sweet with the odor of flowers and newly mown hay. Their ostensible destination was a half-day's fishing, or jaunt in the woods. By some occult force, however, the road to these delectable mountains always led by Uncle Eben's hospitable door. Besides, the huckleberry interest was naturally a prime reason for calling. Privately, Uncle Eben would chuckle to his wife that ignorance had paid off his mortgage.

"I didn't make his understandin'," he would explain. "If the Lord did, He must be responsible. I can't beat any common sense into the critter." But on the occasions of discussing the matter with an air of business integrity, Uncle Eben bravely lived up to his conscience and Aunt Nancy's scriptural quotations.

"Remember, Eben," Aunt Nancy would advise when she would see the two friends entering the yard, "Remember the Proverb, 'A false balance is abomination to the Lord; but a just weight is His delight.'"

"But, Nancy, I have explained it to him time and

again," Uncle Eben would maintain. "He can't see nothin'."

"But, Pa, do you do it with an undivided heart? Or be you tryin' to serve two masters? 'Riches profit not in the day of wrath; but righteousness delivereth from death.'"

"Riches from that huckleberry field will not profit anywhere. I do get pesky tired livin' up to Solomon's precepts when folks won't let you. Bad enough when they have a weather eye out to see that you do; that kinder stimulates you, but when they don't care!—and that young rascal don't."

Uncle Eben's patience would return, however, by the time the three were seated on the porch.

"Now, Mr. Leighton," he would say, "as I've told you many times, I don't believe them air berries will pay you one per cent., not to mention principal. I'm willin' to put the ground in as good condition as possible, let 'em spread, thin 'em out, and set some new ones. I ought ter be when I'm so well paid for my work; but—there's the pickers, if the fruit ever grows, the risk of a market, and the cost of gettin' 'em there if you have one. If I didn't tell you what I think, I should be a dum hypocrite. No, Mr. Leighton, they won't pay."

"Look here," Robert would laugh. "Neither money nor berries will grow in a minute. Peg away at them, Mr. Hathaway, and draw your pay, till the few hundred are used. Some day you will wake up to the sight of gold in that field. Suppose we reckon a little," producing pencil and paper. "One hundred and sixty rods in an acre, and $30\frac{1}{4}$ square yards in a rod, make 4,840 square yards. Now three quarts to the yard for the season is a very small estimate in my opinion. That makes 14,520 quarts. And we will certainly realize four cents

a quart, which will bring us \$580.80 per acre. And you say there are, or will be, two and one-half acres devoted to them. That will amount to a handsome profit each year. We may as well begin to class ourselves among the millionaires, Mr. Hathaway."

At such startling figures, Uncle Eben would give up in despair, and with a groan depart to find consolation in Aunt Nancy.

"That young chap," he would say, "seems toler'ble clever in most things, but he don't know no more about farmin' than Liddy Morse, when she said her uncle cut seventy-five tons of hay to the acre. City folks know but precious little; ain't ter blame, I s'pose, but it's hard on yer principles sometimes. Huckleberries! \$580.80 a year! Wall, I'll be durned, Nancy, if I'll wrestle with his ignorance any more, Solomon or no Solomon."

The substance of these remarks was always duly gone through, as prelude to delightful things in store. If Robert ever overheard Uncle Eben's sage conclusions within the kitchen, he only shrugged his shoulders with a smile and joined Esther if she happened to be visible. Sometimes he would find her among the flowers, a bright color glowing in her cheeks, and happiness in her eyes. Did his coming cause them to deepen? He was not quite sure as yet; but he would gather a handful of blossoms, then pause to give a description of peculiar tropical plants he had seen, that he might enjoy the changing lights and graces of her features. Or, perhaps, she might be sewing in the shade of the old oak. While he watched the nimble fingers ply the needle, he would relate interesting anecdotes of foreign lands, or draw mental pictures of their picturesque peoples. She would listen with an impassioned face, and wistful upturned eyes, which spoke

eloquently to his consciousness, and caused a renewal of the vow already made.

Occasionally, for meritorious conduct, he was admitted to the dairy, when Esther was giving the final pats to the golden butter, whose rich color increased the whiteness of the round, bared arms. The strong, mobile hands were just as dexterous as though the power to develop features and character with a simple brush, did not lie hidden within them. Then, when he followed Aunt Nancy out of the cool, sweet nook he would find Richard impatiently awaiting him. Perhaps the fishing or hunting excursion would be continued; but oftener postponed to accept a gracious invitation to dinner.

Thus the time passed merrily on, till at last there came a day, for whose music all the rest had been a voluntary. In after time would its melody strengthen and increase in brilliancy, ending with a recessional grand and triumphant? Or would it sink into a minor chord, dying away in sad refrain of disappointed hopes, and the despairing cry of a wounded heart?

CHAPTER V.

LATE in the afternoon one day Richard was sitting on the hotel piazza comfortably puffing a cigar of choice brand, delighting Hiram Foss with his earnest dipping into town chronicles, when a young couple passed by, their countenances beaming with joy.

"That is Phineas Stevens and Marthy James," Hiram duly announced. "He's a likely young man and she's a fairly smart, tidy girl. They're goin' to be married this fall and live in that little house you see up yender. Happy as two chickens. Hain't no great of worldly goods, but, bless you, they don't mind that. They'll get along. They've got courage and hands."

Weeks later, when Phineas and Marthy Stevens entered their new home on the evening of their marriage, two armchairs in the living room bade them a hospitable welcome. The recipients never knew the name of their donor. They did not know that Hiram's random remarks opened a sacred corner of Richard's heart, where lay hidden a sweet remembrance of youth, and that death halloed its memory; neither did they see the smiles playing about his mouth when the thought of his gift occurred to him that afternoon. But Hiram's voluble tongue dispelled all reminiscences.

"That is Charlie Blake coming now," he went on rapturously. "He's pretty well connected. His mother's sister's husband's aunt lives in New York. Pretty smart folks. She's got a son who is a doctor, and a daughter

younger. Their name's Parkman. Fine young man. I would call him in if you need sech services. He must be goin' on twenty-eight. They used ter come ter Eaton when the young doctor was a lad."

Hiram usually found a patient listener in Richard, who saw much pathos in the recital of simple lives honestly lived. This afternoon, however, his mind wandered. He believed both in Robert's promise and in his fickleness, and a certain shyness on the part of Esther was attributed to natural reserve; yet he was troubled. He had come to feel almost a paternal care over Esther. Why could she not be content with the life surorunding her? To be sure she had no word in the plan of her creation. She did not make and mould herself. There she was, with her beauty, her pride, her soul's longing for the gratification of its own given tastes; with its love for the beautiful, and the homage due inspiration. This was her inheritance to enjoy or strive with. Which would entail the least misery to a nature like hers—a humdrum, toiling life here among the hills? or, in the other way, with perhaps a broken heart, which the world did not see, so cleverly was it concealed among the world's glories which were hers by right of being? He could not tell. Either way she must work out her own destiny. If it were already decreed by force of natural, occult laws, there was nothing to do but tread the pathway, be it cruel with thorns, or sweet-scented with flowers. And she might never care for Robert, if he wished it.

After answering Hiram at random, till that long suffering individual looked at him in amazement, he rose with courteous adieus.

Phineas and Martha Stevens had again sent him drifting into such a reverie he had almost forgotten an engagement at Uncle Eben's. It was Aunt Nancy's birth-

day, and Esther had planned a little surprise, to which Robert and himself were invited. Glancing at his watch, he hastily sought his room for a change of dress; then, partly from habit, partly from a secret wish he might find him there, he knocked at Robert's door. There was no response. He knew very well the young man had slyly slipped away an hour ago.

So engrossed had he been in his dreamy speculations, he had neither noticed the massing of threatening clouds nor the distant peals of thunder; therefore, when he reached Uncle Eben's house, numerous hands beckoning him into the meadow below was rather a surprise, and sharpened his eyes and ears.

When the first rumble was heard, Uncle Eben, innocent of any secret deliberations, stoutly declared a certain load of hay must be secured.

"Oh, Uncle!" Esther spoke up, alarmed. "Never mind it this time. It may not rain."

"It may, too. That hay is comin' in. I will just toot the horn for Jim Stone to come over and help."

Esther looked at the clock with a sigh of resignation.

"If it must be done, Mr. Hathaway," Robert put in, "here's another hand. Many hands make light work, you know."

Uncle Eben looked at the stylish summer suit with commiseration.

"Spile yer clothes," he lamented. "But you can have my overalls and jumper," he suggested, thoughtful of his hay.

"Pretty good fit as far as they go," Robert laughed, surveying himself thus attired. "I have grown out of them. They will take me for Hi Foss."

"Why, Eben!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed, coming into the room, greatly shocked at her husband's lack of respect.

"It's all right, Mrs. Hathaway," Robert consoled.

"And if that hay must be got in, we will help, too, Aunt Nancy," Esther called from the parlor. "We can rake after the cart. It is cool, and sweet clover will not harm the daintiest gown."

This was the reason of Richard's finding the family suddenly converted into hay-makers.

"Allow me to contribute my mite," he offered, taking in the situation, and throwing off his coat. "No, I'm all right. My rig is not quite so delicate as the immaculate Robert's. Mr. Stone, I propose you get down and help Uncle Eben pitch. I'll take your place, and Robert and I will mow away so fast you will have to take breath."

"I dunno's it's goin' ter rain after all," Uncle Eben remarked when the hay was nearly loaded, sweeping the horizon with prophetic eyes. "When the clouds slip around that air mountain, we don't get much on't."

The shower did seem to be going that way; but in response to Esther's entreaties to make haste, the work was soon accomplished, the novices following Uncle Eben's instructions very creditably.

Richard and Robert had fished for salmon in the Hebrides, and climbed Mont Blanc. They had gathered grapes in Italy and oranges in Jamaica. But they had never experienced the novel sensation of having a small mountain grow beneath them, soft, fragrant, tempting them to drive into its very depths, while overhead the threatening sky grew blacker, and the lightning sent its serpent tongues still nearer. Then, when all was ready, what exhilaration it was to sit on the monument of their own inexperienced handiwork, and look down into the radiant face of the girl following them. Her own eyes were hidden by their long lashes, as she stepped briskly along, exquisitely free and graceful of motion.

A look of determined resolution passed over Robert's face, as he watched her, mingled with scorn at the thought of his resolve being thwarted.

*"Maud Muller on a summer's day,
Raked the meadow sweet with hay,"*

he repeated in a low tone.

*"So closing his heart the Judge rode on,
And Maud was left in the field alone."*

Richard responded.

*"And of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: It might have been,"*

Robert promptly added. "Before another day——"

The communication was interrupted.

"You better duck your heads back there," Uncle Eben called out as they entered the barn door.

"And I'm ever so much obleeged," he went on, when Robert and Richard had alighted. "I vum, though, I don't believe it's goin' ter rain here a mite. Too bad! When you work desput hard to find 'twas all for nothin' it makes yer heart sink a bit. Sorry. You'd feel better paid to have an old rousin' downpour."

"We might have got wet," Richard laughed, "and for one I prefer the present state of affairs."

"And now," Esther began as soon as they were in the house, "I have—this, you remember, Uncle Eben, is Aunt Nancy's birthday. I have a little surprise for both of you. I want you two to go immediately to your room to dress, and remain there till you are called. The hay has retarded plans somewhat, so that you are to mind

without any words, like good children. You two gentlemen I shall imprison in the parlor for the present. But first, I must have the table carried into the sitting room for the grand occasion."

It took Uncle Eben a moment to recover his equanimity. Then he said: "You are a good girl, Esther; but if this is to celebrate Ma's birthday, let us have it here in the old kitchen. Ma and I have had our ups and downs; sometimes we'd git a little riled, but the storms always passed around like this one is doin', leavin' no traces behind. Let us have it here, Esther, where so many other comfortable birthdays will be around us."

"Oh, yes," Richard protested. "The cool sweet air from that vine-covered porch is delicious; and the view from these windows leads one's imagination over the whole field of geology, and lands him on the plains of wonder and delight."

"We shouldn't feel at home anywhere else, Esther," Aunt Nancy ventured, "and the gentlemen have eaten here before."

And so it was settled, Esther smothering a little disappointment. Left alone she soon had a tempting repast in order, with a snowy cake of her own making nestling in a wreath of myrtle, gracing the center of the table.

Then came the most important features of the occasion. Richard was left on guard, while Robert and Esther ran down to the rustic studio to bring Aunt Nancy's finished portrait; for the presentation of this all else had been arranged. Richard had recommended a dealer in New York, from whom a suitable frame had been secured at a reasonable price.

"It has almost seemed as if I had two Aunt Nancys," Esther remarked dreamingly, as they took the treasure from its hiding place for the last time. "I have passed

so many delightful hours with this one. She has been the confidant of many dreams and the inspiration of them. I shall feel as if I had lost a friend, and the place will be lonely without her." There was a suspicious sob in the voice.

The clouds had parted. Already in the western sky was a golden glow, with rose-tinted mist above it. There was an enchantment in the air sweet with the fragrance of the wood, while the brook rippled a melody as accompaniment to hearts.

"I, too, love the place, Esther," Robert answered in a low, caressing voice, imprisoning two trembling hands, while frightened upturned eyes looked searchingly into his. "I love the place because here I first met you. Let us consecrate it now. I have all the while intended to say this to you, but not as yet. Is it too soon? The bewitching Maud Muller of this afternoon drove prudence to the winds. May I tell my love for you? And plead that it may carry you away into the world you long to enter?"

For the moment Robert was sincere. "You care for me, Esther? May I sometime come to claim you?"

The girl's reply was heard only by Robert and the birds, which hushed a merry roulade to look in wonder at the intruders. Perhaps they understood. Who knows?

Meantime Richard was growing impatient at the delay, and anxious lest he could not longer restrain the two prisoners. A fear that an accident might have befallen the picture was dispelled as the delinquents appeared. He met them at the door, and speedily and secretly Aunt Nancy was enthroned on the new easel waiting for her in the parlor.

"Hi, there!" Uncle Eben called. "Ma and I are pesky hungry. How much longer must we stay cooped up?"

"Everything is ready," was the pleasant rejoinder.

Richard escorted the worthy couple to the room which was prettily trimmed with flowers, Esther received them and Robert made a short speech of welcome; then, with much formality he presented the portrait as an offering of love from their gifted niece.

For an instant there was silence.

"Ma," Uncle Eben broke out, slyly wiping his eyes, "it's more like you than yourself. It sartin is. You don't allus show all yer good p'int on the surface, but Esther has got down into yer heart and hunted 'em up. They overtop the bad ones, too, Nancy," he went on with a critical eye. "Can't hardly see 'em. The eyes are sartin yours, and all the rest. You're young Nancy, old Nancy and all the Nancys in one. I'm just goin' ter give you a birthday present, too."

"Why, Eben!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed, happiness shining through tears, and blushing at the rousing kiss left on her mouth. "Befote all these folks, too. What will they think? How frisky you're gettin', Eben! Esther," she said, clasping her arms around the girl, "forgive me for all the chiding." The tears had got down into the voice. "I am not sure," she added with an arch smile, "that it was not a waste of time, puttin' me on canvas, as 'twere. You are a wonderful child," and another kiss was at hand.

"Are those going to be passed around?" Richard asked, lest the emotion should end disastrously.

"Not at present," Esther laughed, proud of her success, and of the dear couple's gladness. "Supper is next in order."

It was growing dark, so that lamps were lighted. The room was filled with silent romance; a part stretched back through the fleeting years, veiled with the glamor of the

past; a part was clothed in the brilliancy of the present, while not a little reached blindly out into a visionary future; only one dark shadow obscured it, and that Robert concealed.

It was an evening all remembered. It ended with music, as the most of their evenings ended. During an explanation by Richard to Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy, of some of the rude methods of agriculture in foreign lands, Robert and Esther stole out onto the porch, the light from the window shining full on their faces. The hum of conversation within softened as the speakers listened to the opening strains of the guitar.

"Come with the lute," sang Esther.

"Come with the lay," Robert followed. Then when both voices rang out the lines:

*"Come where my love lies dreaming,
Her beauty beaming,"*

Richard quickly turned to look at them. His acute ear recognized a tone in the notes he did not like. Robert was looking at Esther with the exultation of resolution about to be fulfilled, while Esther's eyes sought his, shining with an unconscious light of hope and with almost a cry in her voice.

When good-nights were said Richard carelessly remarked, "I must leave for New York on the first morning train."

Surprise and regrets elicited no further information, except that he might return to Eaton during the summer, and that he might never visit the place again. He thanked Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy for their kind hospitality, and gave Esther many wishes for success.

Whatever may have been the cause, Esther could never voluntarily disclose what gave her the keenest joy or the

keenest pain. To do this was to touch a bare nerve in her untrained sensitiveness. There seemed to be a barrier of reserve between herself and her own wishes, which needed sympathy to remove. The right mother would have wisely guided this characteristic. Aunt Nancy only partially understood it, and did not realize its significance. Even Richard was deceived, and half believed his trip to New York was unnecessary. Nevertheless, he said to Robert as soon as they were on their way to the hotel, "Esther is becoming complicated in this affair and I shall speak. I shall tell Uncle Eben the whole story to-morrow morning before I leave. I have both begged and reasoned and you will not listen."

Robert trembled with anger, but indifferently replied: "You may save yourself the trouble, Dick. It is not necessary. For once you are mistaken. I did a little skirmishing to-night, and, as far as I am concerned, the girl is heart whole."

"Did you propose to her to learn this?"

"No. I will confess I have intended to do so, and believed I should win; but—well—a few remarks convinced me it was useless; it doesn't take a fellow long to find that out if he is sharp. Miss Mather enjoys me as a friend and may not be quite up to conventional methods in concealing the fact."

"On the contrary," Richard rejoined, "she is not one who wears her heart on her sleeve. I know a thing or two, myself. There was a new note in her singing to-night, which shows the heart has been touched."

"Pshaw, Dick! You are getting panicky," Robert laughed. "As the most interested party, I think my knowledge of the situation is apt to be the correct one; therefore, will it do any good to tell the story, as you call it?"

"No," Richard said, thoughtfully, "if you are positive you are not mistaken."

"Well, I am positive. Besides, Dick, suppose I were mistaken. Grant that the girl might care something for me, and be the means of making me what you wish me to be—a real sober-minded, parson-like chap—would you be fulfilling your promise to my father in trying to thwart the remedy?"

Richard laid his hand kindly on Robert's shoulder, with a firmness in his face the latter had learned to respect. He looked steadily into the eyes lightly returning his glance. Robert was master of his eyes. He could make them pleading, tender, penitent, or blazing with wrath, as the occasion suited him; they were no index of the emotion possessing him.

"Don't say that, my boy," Richard began with repressed feeling. "With all your faults you have never tried to play upon a solemn promise given to a dying man I loved, to have mercy on his son. I remember the promise. I hold it sacred. But you know that the work of regeneration must begin from principle, from a love of right, from a determination to be worthy of a girl like Esther, and not simply to be used as a means to win her under cover that she will make a man of you. Make a man of yourself. She shall not be a victim. Until you are conqueror of yourself I will prevent it."

"How earnest you are, Dick," Robert laughed, stepping back, "when you have so little to be worried about. You are right as always, and I will begin now. Although I really do not admire Esther as I thought I should, I have learned that it would be worth while to deserve a girl like her. I will begin now."

"Well you settle down to some occupation?"

"Yes."

"And be in earnest, and make it an object in life?"

"Yes, Dick, I will. I do not care for the money I have let Uncle Eben have."

"As far as the money is concerned, you might have disposed of it in a less worthy way. I am glad it will do some good," Richard declared. "Will you go with me to-morrow?" he asked.

"I prefer to remain a few days longer, but if you should send for me I would start immediately."

"And you promise not to attempt to change Esther's feelings toward you?" Richard urged.

"I promise that faithfully," Robert replied, with inner exultation. "It would be of no use."

"Well, then, hold yourself in readiness, Robert, to answer any summons."

CHAPTER VI.

Is it to be marvelled at that Esther entered upon a charmed existence? That the dawn of the new day just breaking was silver-tipped, with a few rose-colored mists in the otherwise cloudless sky? Was it strange that the fresh, sweet air of such a morning quickened the pulse of imagination? Or that the glimmer of a future brilliant noonday dazzled the understanding? With all this exhilaration about her, she was borne on a new wave in the rhythm of life, which sparkled in the sunlight with myriads of diamonds and emeralds; while beyond lay a shore line of living green, stretching away in undulations of sweet-scented verdure.

Esther was without guile. Her mind was as healthful and pure as the atmosphere of the hills around her. She looked out upon the world with frank, fearless eyes, judging it by the standard of her own innocence and honesty. Perhaps she had not been well educated in these things. She lived before these days of careers, when every girl believes herself born for a mission, and is well versed in the intricacies of life, its lights and shadows, before she is well in her teens.

Eaton hamlet comprised sober, industrious, honest New England country-folk. There was no great wealth for object lessons of responsibility; nor was there abject poverty to teach of charitable enterprise, with its accompany-

ing discouragement in learning that the more one accomplishes the more one may. There were no clubs for self-crucifixion or culture; and the Foreign Missionary Society was always relegated to the older citizens. When afflictions befell them, Esther was accustomed to hear them attributed to a kind Providence; in a childish way she had concluded if they were thus sent as a benediction, there was no special need to mourn for the recipients. Her ear was not familiar with scandals. The weekly local paper and the Congregationalist did not enlighten her in dark and devious ways; ways, which envelop so many in a network of circumstances, almost decreeing a lower standard of pleasure and virtue to be the only pathway allowed them. She had grown as modest and sweet as the violets of her native fields, with a whole-souled trust in others evolved from her own inner consciousness. Her life thus far had held her naturally intense emotion in reserve; now, with this great new joy come to her it blossomed into full fruition. She simply accepted the fact as one of pure enjoyment. Her heart swelled with exultation at the vista opening before her. Not a doubt cast its shadow over the brightness. She went to Robert with a whole heart, whose every page was open for his reading. She accepted him with the purest faith.

With the multitude, perhaps the crises of life come silently, perceptibly approaching each day till they stand before you unattended by surprise; with a few, they are seismic disturbances, whose convulsions overturn the placid plains of one's nature, either to destroy, or to bring to light the granite peaks of character hitherto concealed. Already such an upheaval threatened Esther. In response to its rumblings the sunlit skies became clouded. A speck not so large as a man's hand shot its unwelcome head above the horizon.

The days following Richard's departure were one unbroken holiday-time to the lovers. Yet, their comings and goings were so much in accordance with those of the preceding weeks, and with the "new branch of industry," as Uncle Eben phrased it, that he and Aunt Nancy were quite oblivious to their new relations.

"Let us admit no one to our confidence just yet," Robert urged. "For a little time let it remain our own delicious secret. Then, when I have gathered sufficient courage to inform Uncle Eben I have stolen his best treasure, we will arrange it in a convincing way. At present that berry patch is about all his nerves will stand," he laughed.

Indeed that humble patch of ground was a severe strain; so much so that when one morning Aunt Nancy remarked that Hiram Foss was coming, Uncle Eben fairly jumped from his chair.

"And just like as not he's got word somehow about that huckleberry business, for all you've been so secret. I know that's it," Aunt Nancy continued, greatly disturbed. "He's comin' to pump. Wants to send it down in the annals as an underhanded scheme of Eben Hathaway, member. Keep your mouth as tight as a clam shell, Eben."

"Don't you worry, Ma. My conscience is clean; but I couldn't make folks understand it. I ruther face the whole o' judgment day than have 'em git hold on't."

"Easy, Eben. Don't get riled," Aunt Nancy encouraged.

"I can't help it. I shall begin to wish the whole durned thing was in—in——"

"Take care, Eben. Careful."

"—— in Halifax," Uncle Eben ended, as he rushed out of the house.

"Mornin'," Hiram greeted, as Uncle Eben met him at the woodpile, thinking it might be just as well to be out of range of Aunt Nancy's ear, if his tongue should slip.

"I've come over on a ticklish kind o' business," Hiram began, as the two sat down on a log, with their backs to the shed door. "But I thought you orter know about it."

"I b'lieve I've always led a pretty upright life, Mr. Foss." There was a decided tinge of resentment in the tone.

"Mr. Foss!" Hiram repeated in surprise. "What's the matter with 'Hi'? Who's said you hadn't, I'd like to know? It ain't about anything you done? Something you orter do."

"I rather guess, *Mr. Foss*, my integrity ain't scorched yit. And I rather guess I can take care on't a spell longer. I hain't gone inter anything with my conscience left strapped down sullen."

"Lordy massy, Uncle Eben! Don't fire up so! When anybody has anything agin Eben Hathaway, they must talk to somebody besides me, that's all. Grip hold of your nerves a bit. It's about that young feller that's been hanging around considerable."

"Oh, yes. I s'pose so," Uncle Eben groaned. "What's the matter with him?"

"Wall, I don't s'pose any real harm is done yet, if folks do talk. But I thought you better nip it in the bud; thought you'd want to, before it got to growin'. I've ben over to Hudson. Some folks had ben up from York who know him. They was visiting at Edwin Tolland's. Pretty squandery, he is. A leetle——"

"Wall, if he squanders with his eyes open, whose business is it?" Uncle Eben interrupted.

"Stop your snappin', Eben."

"Wall, I ain't to blame for his ignorance."

"Ignorance!" Hiram exclaimed. "He knows enough. You seem to be the one not blessed with knowledge."

Uncle Eben wanted to relate how he had striven with Robert about those berries, but he remembered Aunt Nancy's advice and was silent.

"Yes," Hiram went on, "the whole o' Eaton has ben wonderin' how fast things were going with him and Esther."

"Esther!" Uncle Eben ejaculated, jumping up. Between his relief that it was not about the berries and his astonishment at the revelation, he hesitated whether it were best to whistle or not.

"Why, yes," Hiram laughed. "You'n Aunt Nancy have kinder forgot the signs o' the times, I guess. Mrs. Foss keeps me sort o' reminded of courtin' days in her lectures on industry. That's the greatest fault with that woman. She don't seem to know a man can't work all the time; that occasionally he must tend to the higher needs of humanity. She's a pretty good provider, herself. No fault to find in that line. But this ere young spruce ain't just the one we want for Esther, if what I heard is straight. Too risky."

"He seems straight enough."

Uncle Eben realized he must be as reticent in regard to Esther as about "the new branch of industry."

"Couldn't find out any particular wrong he'd done," Hiram went on placidly; "only rather fast and spend-thrifty; not quite on the square as to general conduct. I did my level best to learn some specialty against him; had a mind to go down to York and look up his record."

"Wall, Hiram, you needn't be to so much trouble on our account. Guess Esther's all right. He's ben around some with Dick Benson."

"Why didn't he go with him?"

"Dunno. Kinder guess he knows. He has a little business 'round to look after. Much obleeged for yer kind intentions, though."

"I don't ask nothin'," Hiram returned, rising. "Help a friend any time. I'd sort o' look up his record. Return the favor if you find anything of note. Good mornin'. Looks some like rain."

After watching Hiram out of sight Uncle Eben tiptoed into the house. "It wasn't the business, Nancy," he said, exultantly, "but I bluffed just as much as if it had ben."

Then he related the substance of the conversation. "Mr. Tolland's folks wouldn't say such things unless there was some truth in 'em," he ended despondently. "What shall we do? Don't want ter put it into her head if it ain't there. Do you s'pose Esther and him have ben makin' love?"

"I can't tell, Eben," was the discouraging answer. "Young folks still persist in doin' such things. They may have a different way from what we used to."

"We must call the culprit, if culprit she is," Uncle Eben decided, and Esther was summoned.

"I hain't the least idea there's any need to caution you," Uncle Eben began in a conciliatory voice, when Esther appeared, fresh as the morning. "Don't s'pose you care much for anybody 'with so little judgment about crops. Richard Benson understands things a great deal better. But you must be less friendly with the other one. You—you and Robert hain't ben makin' love have you?" he asked abruptly, nervously fingering his hat. "Because I've ben hearin' tales about him."

Esther made no reply. With blushing cheeks she stood for a moment with downcast eyes, then she looked straight at her questioner. In the proud poise of the

head, the lovelight of her eyes, and a new dignity of presence which well became her, Aunt Nancy read the girl's heart. She saw with apprehension that Esther would defend her lover. "We think only of your own good, dear," she said softly.

"That's it, Little Queen," Uncle Eben begged. "Just wait. If you've begun to like him a little, promise you won't any more."

"How can she promise, Pa, if she does?" Aunt Nancy remonstrated.

"I know it's dum ticklish kind o' stuff ter handle," Uncle Eben lamented. "Never know whether it's goin' ter send yer to heaven or perdition."

"Is it just, Uncle Eben, to accuse and condemn one unheard?" Esther asked.

Her voice was quiet but firm. A new element had come into her being which Aunt Nancy and Uncle Eben recognized. The child had been transformed into a woman.

"Wall, perhaps not," Uncle Eben admitted. "You must remember, though," he announced with rather a lordly air for a little man, "that it's one thing to be in business with a gentleman from New York, and another to love him."

"Don't be set up, Pa," Aunt Nancy nudged.

"And," the good man continued, undisturbed, "I'll go over to see Hiram again to-day. I b'lieve he knows more'n he tells. Meantime, I forbid you having any more to say to the young man at present. Now go and think it over, and mind what I say."

Aunt Nancy's motherly heart was touched at the girl's silence. She knew that when Esther felt the most, she was wont to use but few words. She put her arms about her and kissed her. This expression of feeling was in-

dicative of great sympathy, as she was of an undemonstrative nature.

"Men don't know much about managin'," she affirmed, closing the door after Esther. "Tellin' her to think it over and mind! The more she thinks it over the more she won't heed. You shouldn't have commanded her anything about it."

"No, I s'pose not. Women is mighty unsartin critters, anyhow. Now I come to remember, you was middlin' frisky when I was steppin' up to you. Never knew just where ter find yer. I s'pose if Eve had ben told she must eat ev'ry dum apple on that tree, she wouldn't have tetched one."

"And Adam would have had his delicious bite all to himself," Aunt Nancy retorted tartly. "He seemed to enjoy it amazin' well."

"Wall," Eben soothed, "we'll not both git riled to once over that. As the commentators say, we don't just agree on that p'int; so we'll not discuss it. But if Esther must take to leanin' after either of 'em why don't she take Richard? He's consider'ble older, I know; and, of course, I've no fault to find with Robert, myself; but I do think Richard a leetle more substantial of the two."

"I agree with what I read the other day," Aunt Nancy spoke up with spirit, "that woman's love is always kinder blind, else the parsons wouldn't get many wedding fees."

"You didn't run any risk, Ma, anyhow. You didn't need any spectacles. I know when a man's in love his eyes see visions the Apostle John never thought of; I s'pose it's the same with women."

"They see more'n two Johns, Eben. Sometimes more'n forty of 'em. But don't pester the child at present."

"No. We'll be lenient and keep a sharp eye out.

Sometimes love goes licky-ter-split when it gits started."

Meanwhile, Esther sat in her room, a look of determination disfiguring the usually gentle face, and with several unfamiliar scowls on her brow.

A little excursion had been planned by Robert and herself for this very day, to which Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy, with a few village friends, were to be invited. The trip was to be up one of the hills of easy access, where there was a grove. Within the grove was a cave formerly occupied by a hermit, who was now dead. It was learned from some papers found after his death that his home had been in a distant state, and it was judged from their import that at one time he must have been a brilliant young man. Some thought it was overstudy which weakened the brain, as a caution against this was jotted down on a margin; while a letter simply signed "Harry," contained the information that the maiden he loved had eloped with another. A young Lochinvar had come, and with "One touch to her hand, and one word in her ear," had carried her away. The cumulative effect of both causes may have produced the dire result. In some unknown way the young man drifted to Eaton one spring and took up his abode in the cave. He had money to buy his meager fare, and he would accept nothing from the townspeople, however tempting it might be. He lived but a few months and died alone. Some of the people kindly purchased a beautiful burial place in their own cemetery, and, with much sympathy and sorrow for the blighted life, the bruised soul was at rest. None ever knew his name. The circumstance cast a sort of halo of romance about the spot, and as it possessed intrinsic beauty, it was a frequent resort for pleasure parties.

After much deliberation Esther secretly sent a note to Robert that the holiday trip must be abandoned; that he

must not visit them that day, but to meet her for a brief interview in the studio at sundown.

The many enjoyable meetings at the studio had never been secretly planned, as there was no reason why they should be. The fragrance of the air, together with woods and fields melodious in their quiet, formed sufficient excuse. Yet, if Uncle Eben had known of their frequency, he might have sooner understood the drift of young hearts.

Esther had never tripped thitherward with so much trepidation as when she stole away on this afternoon with the sun still half an hour high. Robert, equally impatient, soon came. Instead of the merry, blushing, rosy girl who was wont to greet him, he beheld with amazement a white face with trembling lips and timid, questioning eyes. For an instant his own cheek paled.

"What is it, Esther?" His voice was not steady. "Sit down," he begged as the girl withdrew from him. "Tell me what troubles you."

Then the occurrence of the morning was related.

"And it was Hi Foss?" Robert reflected thoughtfully at the close of the recital. "He had been to Hudson? Some one from New York visiting at Edwin Tolland's? I know no one who visits in that town. I never heard the name of Edwin Tolland. It is all a malicious scheme on the part of some one to make trouble between us. Probably it is some one in Eaton."

"And it is all untrue?"

"Esther," Robert answered, evading a direct reply, "is there any one who never does a foolish thing? And is there no forgiveness for repentance? Can you not trust me?"

"And you will explain to Uncle Eben?" Esther pleaded,

wistful and pensive, yet with joy returning to her face. "You will tell him it is all false?"

"Yes, dear, but not just now. It is better not to see him to-night. Besides, darling, I received a telegram from Dick an hour ago. I have engaged a man to take me to Hillester to catch the late evening train. I have only one half hour to give you."

"You must go to-night?" The lips trembled.

"Without fail."

"When will you return?"

"That depends very much upon yourself, Esther," Robert urged, clasping the now willing hands within his own. "I want you to promise me something, here in this bower, dreamy with twilight, and breathing reminiscences of all our happy days. Will you promise this—that when I return in a few weeks, you will become my bride? That you will do this with your uncle's and aunt's consent, if it can be obtained? That you will do so without it if the consent should be refused? Without this promise you can see I could not return at all."

Some one has written, "There is nothing so cruel as love when it has a rival." Esther no longer remembered the tenderness of years; the thought that none but those who had been as parents from her babyhood could be so watchful of her happiness was wholly overshadowed. There was but little time for decision. Robert's eyes were fastened upon her with all their witching attraction. His voice, full of caress, thrilled her through and through with emotion. Love was calling in its hallowed voice, softly and tenderly.

"Come," Robert cried with outstretched arms.

With eyes full of trust and a shy, sweet gladness, Esther slowly crept into them. Silence was eloquent with the language of each heart; hers with the great joy fol-

lowing a day of doubt and fear and heartache, which had become only a frightful dream; and his?

A little later he held her at arm's length and looked at her. She had never been so beautiful. Her whole face wore the repose of satisfaction. The flush of the setting sun peering through the leaves reflected the reddish-golden tints of hair. The eyes were moist with unshed tears both of joy and pain; while the cheeks glowed with the excitement of certainty—and of the unknown.

"If anything should happen," Robert said, almost fiercely, "if any accident should prevent our meeting again——"

Esther shivered at the measured words and broken sentence.

"There will not," he ended lightly. "All will be well with us, whatever comes. It shall."

A glance at his watch, a kiss on the quivering red lips, a few words of good-by, and he was gone.

Esther knew but little of life's school of discipline. She was too young and healthy to have troubled apprehension of the future. Youth is so strong, and feels so secure in its strength. Yet she was half sad when she returned to the house. The fact that she was deceiving those who loved her would not let her conscience wholly rest. "It will all be right," she reasoned with confidence. "Robert will prove to Uncle that it was malice which prompted such criticism of him."

Uncle Eben rather wondered at the girl's spirit and rejoiced over it. He supposed he had some news to relate, as the three sat for a chat before retiring.

"I saw Robert Leighton a minute when I was down to the village a little while ago," he announced. "He was just startin' for Hillester. I told him our little girl was too young to think of love; that she did not understand the ways of the world; and we wished to know all

about a young man before such a thing could be thought of; and that perhaps it would interfere with the business, but he must not pay Esther any more attention, at present, anyway."

"What did he say to that, Pa?" Aunt Nancy asked anxiously.

"He said my decision in that respect would not in any way affect the business. To go right on. The money was in my name and to go on using it in the work or out of it. I felt kinder bad for the poor chap. I could see he was sort o' cut up over it, and he is so liberal, too. His father must have left him a lot o' money. Pity he hadn't a brother or sister to look after him; no mother, either."

"He seems to be quite alone, poor young man," Aunt Nancy replied sympathetically. "Did he tell where he was goin'?"

"He said to New York. A perfect Babylon, York is. After all, Esther, I guess he didn't care much for you. He wouldn't have given up so easy. Can't tell nothin' by these frisky city chaps. I'm glad you show the right sperit."

"A little scratch on the heart soon heals," Aunt Nancy remarked, after Esther had said good-night and left the room, "but a deep one hurts middlin' bad. I'm glad it was took in season and that he's gone."

Indeed, Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy breathed a deep sigh of relief. They believed the difficulty had been settled so much more easily than if Robert had remained in town. They watched Esther closely, but failed to discern any regret for the outcome of affairs; only, occasionally they would catch her looking at them with a great longing in her eyes, and there was a pathetic tenderness in her care for them, while she grew more beautiful each day. She worked diligently on the portrait of Uncle Eben, which she seemed anxious to finish. Be-

tween the hours spent at the studio, when not assisting in household cares, she was busily employed in creating a thing of beauty from sheer white muslin and laces. Greatly to her aunt's astonishment, she insisted on purchasing the dress with her own savings. She would have none of their assistance. A cloth gown was acquired in the same way, and speedily made, with hat to match. Many a fairy castle was stitched into the robes; castles that overlooked a warm silver sea, with brightness above and around, while love stood within, ever beckoning to enter its charmed portals.

Thus the days passed quietly but swiftly on, till another mile stone in the young life was reached. Robert Leighton was again in Eaton. On the morrow he would claim his bride.

On the preceding day Esther prepared the supper as usual. The portrait was finished and placed on its easel near Uncle Eben's chair. There were no festive exercises and gay laughter as on the previous occasion; and the joy and pride of her foster-parents at this gift from her did not lessen the sadness of heart and sting of conscience. She mechanically went through the evening duties and the usual good-nights, then at last found herself alone in her room.

Robert's letter announcing his arrival, and claiming her promise to marry him under any and all circumstances, lay open before her troubled eyes. The scene of the parting in the arbor was lived over again. Once more she looked into the beseeching eyes, and heard the tender, pleading voice. Again love was calling. She folded the letter with a radiant smile, hiding it in her bosom. Hot tears fell on the little Bible as she read her usual evening chapter. This had been one of the commands laid upon her from her youth up; and it was her mother's Bible

she held; she never thought of omitting this duty amidst the fear and joy and uncertainties of the morrow.

She slept but little through the long night. She knew it might be the last she would ever sleep in the dear little room. The morrow would open a new vista in her life. Be it never so bright, it could not banish sadness from her heart.

At the first streak of dawn she arose. Every nook and corner of the old garden was visited, while her uncle and aunt still slept. In her chamber the white gown and the cloth one were laid side by side. Her trunk was already packed when she was summoned to breakfast. It was the day for her to go to the city for her music lesson, and the family were astir early.

"Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy," Esther began when the meal was finished, "I have a confession to make to you. Robert Leighton is here. I promised to marry him when he should come for me. We are to be married to-day."

For a moment silence followed the announcement. The surprise was too great for words.

"You have promised to marry him to-day, Esther?" Uncle Eben at length found voice to ask.

"Yes, Uncle."

"You promised this before he went away?"

"I did."

"And were you already engaged to him that morning Hiram Foss came over?" Aunt Nancy said.

"Yes, Aunty."

"Why had you not told us about it?"

"Robert wished to wait awhile."

"That bodes no good, child." Uncle Eben slowly shook his head in perplexity and doubt. "But if we forbid you to do this thing?" he added.

"I have given my word, Uncle Eben. I must keep it." The gladness of the face shone through the fast falling tears. "If you will not give us your blessing we must leave you and the dear old home without it, and be married elsewhere."

There was so much decision struggling through the trembling words! Both listeners realized that neither threats nor commands would be heeded. Another way must be sought.

"My Little Queen," Uncle Eben said, rising from his chair and going to Esther, "you have made us suddenly grow old these last few minutes. Give us a little time to think. Will you give us a little time to see the way clear?"

For answer Esther threw her arms around his neck and burst into tears.

Aunt Nancy went about her work as one in a dream. "Poor little Esther!" she would sigh to herself. "Can we let her go without our love and good wishes?"

A long time Uncle Eben walked across the yard, back and forth, to and fro, with bowed head and tottering steps. Then from some unknown reason he turned and slowly walked toward the arbor. Esther watched him with a sinking heart. She was to meet Robert there at an early hour to perfect their plans. He might already be awaiting her. Possibly Uncle Eben had this in mind. Just outside the studio he stopped and listened. One, two, three full minutes passed, when he suddenly whirled and rapidly approached the house. A long consultation with Aunt Nancy followed; then Esther was called.

"Little Queen," Uncle Eben said kindly, with an affectionate caress, "of course we have expected that some day a sweetheart would come to carry you away; we did not want it to happen so soon, but most of all we

were anxious there should be no mistake about it. It is of no use to tell a girl she must like this one or that one. The heart is a rebellious thing, and full of confidence when the favored suitor comes. It is your best good we think of. And now, Ma and I will send for a few friends to see us give you away. The whole village shall have the privilege to come afterwards and say good-by."

Even now Eaton folk rejoice in picturing the simple out-of-door wedding, and they never have forgotten the beauty of the bride.

It was late in the afternoon of the warm September day, when Esther came among them, lightly leaning on Robert's arm. The last cloud has disappeared with Uncle Eben's and Aunt Nancy's consent; only happiness shone in the fair, glowing face. There were many exclamations of admiration as the couple took their places beneath the sheltering branches of the old green oak. There were no attendants and no conventional ceremonies, the guests being grouped about them in twos and threes while the few binding words were spoken. Congratulations were many and hearty. A friend in Hillester came in answer to a telegram and brought the bride's cake, so that only the interested parties knew it was an impromptu wedding.

For an hour people were coming and going. Then, in her traveling gown Esther went to Uncle Eben for the last farewell. He laid his hand upon her head and looked long into the misty eyes.

"God grant we have made no mistake, Esther," he solemnly breathed. "That would bring my old gray hair to the grave pretty soon. God bless you, my child."

A few more farewells and kisses and tears, then the carriage bearing away the light of the home was lost in the distance. A new page in Esther's life was begun.

CHAPTER VII.

"ARE you sure, Eben," Aunt Nancy questioned an hour later, "that it was Robert you heard in the arbor?"

They were in Esther's room where Uncle Eben had found his wife after searching the house. The room had been left untouched. The delicate draperies, its paintings of flowers which were the girl's own handiwork, the bits of finery scattered here and there, all seemed to comfort the desolate hearts.

"Are you sure it was Robert?" Aunt Nancy repeated anxiously.

Uncle Eben's mercurial temperament had begun to assert its supremacy. Already he was planning when Esther, radiant and matronly, would return to them.

"Of course I'm sure, Ma," he answered in no uncertain voice. "I never before had any idea that Robert Leighton made any profession of religion. He never does. But that prayer! At first I wondered who was in Esther's arbor. Then I went a little nearer, carefully, and recognized the voice. As I listened I was convinced that nobody but a good man could make a prayer like that. I could hardly b'lieve my ears. It beat the minister. It sartin did, Ma. I thought perhaps he might not have always done just right, but no mortal, who had not repented of his iniquity, could make a prayer like that. They couldn't, Ma. I wish you could have heard him. Besides, you know, there was but little time to decide in."

"Why didn't he pray in the meetin' house, then, when it was so handy all summer?" Aunt Nancy reasoned, still somewhat perplexed over the matter. "Why didn't he get up and tell us what a wicked sinner he was, and give us a chance to see how much he had need to repent?"

"I dunno. I wonder he didn't. Because if he had, Nancy, you'd all took him for a saint, sartin. I sometimes think of doin' that air, myself, when I want to be considered uncommon holy."

"Eben! One would think you a wicked man!"

"Wall, I've never ben so desput wicked, just mejum like. But we have done the best way. If Esther is always happy she needs our blessing. If she is not, she certainly does. It is almost like losing our own little ones over again," Uncle Eben added, taking Aunt Nancy's hand affectionately in his own. "Almost like losing them over again."

As they talked the twilight drew on apace. While they were thus alone with their thoughts, the shadows and the moan of the rising wind, Richard Benson was pacing his room, struggling with his anger and a sense of duty. Robert had sent a telegram from Hillester announcing his marriage, and the fact that Esther and himself would expect to receive his congratulations on the morrow. Robert had disappointed him many times, but he had never before deliberately deceived him. Richard's first impulse was to throw him off entirely; then for Esther's sake he determined not to lay down the burden.

This is why, a few days after the wedding, he was watching Esther and Robert standing on the deck of a Cunard steamship, as it glided out from its moorings. From the wharf through the gray mists of rain, he saw a bright face looking down upon him, a face full of God's sweetest sunshine. As it grew more and more

dim, he saw it through anxious thoughts rather than with his eyes; finally, when a white speck fluttering from an invisible hand could no longer be discerned, he turned away with a prayer in his heart.

It was very sudden, this trip to Europe. When New York was reached on the afternoon subsequent to leaving Eaton, Robert became possessed of a great desire to make Esther very much in love with the world for which she had longed. The thought occurred to him that a brief insight into Parisian gayeties, and a glance at Rome's old palaces and works of art, would be a stimulus for greater anticipations which it might be desirable to cultivate. Preparations were hastily made, leaving Richard to select a suite of rooms to be in readiness for them on their return.

Richard remembered this obligation as he thoughtfully found his way to the street, and with characteristic promptness immediately set about it. After quick, decisive balancing of advantages and disadvantages between the Buckingham and the Fifth Avenue, he decided upon the latter, and gave orders for the rooms to be in readiness in a month for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Leighton.

"Robert Leighton?" the proprietor queried. "A relative of Abner Leighton?"

"His son," Richard answered.

"They shall be ready," was the quick response. In social and financial circles there was magic in the name of Abner Leighton, because it represented both culture and integrity.

It was late in the afternoon when this business was satisfactorily ended, but before returning to his office it occurred to Richard there was a little affair of his own needing action, and accordingly he sought his lawyer. He found him in earnest conversation with a man who in-

stantly attracted his attention, and he was only too glad to accept the lawyer's invitation to be seated for a moment, that he might study the striking peculiarities which so impressed him. In figure the stranger was tall, and straight as an arrow. An ample, well shaped forehead betokened an intellect of no common order. An honest, tender heart looked out from the keen, brown eyes, while the mouth was both firm and sensitive, the whole forming a specimen of manhood pleasing to look upon; yet, it was more than these things which solicited Richard's admiration. Infusing the whole was an air of robust honesty he would have given much to see developing in Robert Leighton. He instinctively felt here was a man to be trusted; and also one who would suffer to the end rather than betray a confidence placed in him.

At the close of the conference as the lawyer spoke his name, Richard started in surprise; he rose and motioning him to attend to a new client just entering, he joined the stranger at the door.

"I beg your pardon for delaying you," he said, "but as I was going to look you up to-morrow, I ventured to speak with you now. This is Dr. Parkman, I believe."

"It is," was the cordial reply. "What can I do for you? I am at your service."

"My name is Richard Benson," Richard explained, "and," he laughingly added, "you were recommended to me by Hiram Foss up in Eaton. Do you remember him?"

"Indeed I do," Dr. Parkman affirmed, "and though Hiram is a grotesque character, his recommendation when sincere is enough. He is keen and honest if he is lazy. I think neither of us require further indorsement," he ended, smiling.

"I intended seeing you to-morrow in behalf of a person

whom I wish to assist," Richard said. "I thought it better to give you an item or two of her history, as they undoubtedly influence her physical condition."

"I am to be out of the city all day to-morrow on a surgical case," Dr. Parkman announced with a puzzled frown, as he consulted his watch. "I can give a few moments now, however. Is the patient a young or elderly woman?"

"A young woman with one child."

"What seems to be the matter?"

"Trouble is the prime cause, I fancy. That is what I wish to ascertain, whether it is simply worn out nerves or an organic disease. Although not a relative, not even a friend in the common acceptation of the word, I feel greatly interested in her out of sheer humanity. You will find her naturally refined, though somewhat uncultured by force of circumstances, and with quite a brave little heart."

"Is she a widow?"

At the question a pain swiftly darted across Richard's features as if it recalled unpleasant memories, but he replied: 'She was deserted by her husband. She is supporting herself and child. Please not mention that to her at present; simply suggest if she speaks of it, that she wait a little. Her name is Mrs. Tyler. The bill must be sent to me.'

"When do you wish me to see her?" Dr. Parkman asked.

"She would have accompanied me to-morrow, but——"

"Could she come to my office this evening? I have learned to accept duties on the wing. Here is my card with the hours."

"Yes, I think so. I will attend to it," Richard heartily promised.

"There will be no charge, Mr. Benson," Dr. Parkman declared with emphasis. "If I can bring any comfort to a troubled heart, a little more happiness into a weary life, I am only too glad to do so."

After a few minutes of further conversation the two men separated, mutually pleased with each other. Richard hastened to see Mrs. Tyler, while Dr. Parkman entered his carriage and drove rapidly away toward his home on Lexington Avenue. He was later than usual and he knew a pair of eyes was intently watching for his return; besides, he was tired, and the picture of a cosy library rose vividly before him.

In fact, that particular room was very inviting this autumn night. A fire in the grate welcomed one with its hospitable glow, soft lights revealed both comfort and taste, while a peaceful calm brooded over the place alike restful to body and soul.

Notwithstanding the subtle pleasure given by much that was beautiful in art and furnishings, this was overpowered by the presence of a woman intently peering through half closed shutters. There was nothing majestic in her bearing, yet a fine dignity resulting from a just pride lent a becoming poise to the figure which was a little below medium height. Her fair face was lighted by kindly gray-blue eyes, and framed with waves of silver-white hair. A touch of pathos lurked in the deep recesses of Mrs. Parkman's cheery expression; it had come many years ago, when death had called her young husband; but a gentle spirit and generous heart, nature's rich dowry, aided by the great love for son and daughter, had enabled her to escape all storm-tossed experience, and left her a happy repose so charming that you forgot

all else till she spoke; then the sympathetic voice and the sincere words she uttered made you remember nothing more.

As the hands of the French clock on the mantel pointed to a quarter before six, a sigh escaped the motherly heart, for Neidhurd was late. Nothing avoidable was allowed to disturb their half-hour chat before dinner. If guests were staying at the house, the matter was explained, and no one could unwillingly grant the mother this pleasure, it was so little she saw of her son the remaining part of the day. Patients would occasionally encroach on the Doctor's time, but his own convenience for this hour was set aside.

In consequence it was not long before the sound of wheels was heard, followed by a firm, quick tread through the hall, then the room brightened with Neidhurd Parkman's presence.

"Fifteen minutes late to-night," he said with a tender greeting, "and how has it fared with the little mother all the day?"

"Very well, indeed, Ned. Ethel and I would like your company this evening. Can you go out with us?"

Before replying Dr. Parkman threw off his light overcoat, arranged his medicine cases on the table, then stood with back to the fire, and his hands clasped behind him, smiling down into his mother's face with assumed amazement at such a question.

"It is impossible to-night, for I have just made a special engagement; besides," he slowly announced, "I must read some medical papers before I sleep. It requires eternal vigilance to keep abreast of things these days."

"And you read so much of Darwin and Spencer and Fiske," Mrs. Parkman demurred. "You have enough without philosophy, heredity, or any other science."

"But, mother," the Doctor protested, "one must have something outside his life-work in which he is interested; something which creates a counter enthusiasm; we must not get into ruts without making an effort to crawl to the edge of our own to see what the comrade in the next one is doing. Nothing can ever come between me and my profession. That is my first love. These of which you speak, however, really touch upon it. Heredity especially holds a firm place in advanced minds. We have to remember that our patients are the composite product of ancestors; the result of adaptations or misadaptations to an environment which gave them tendencies to weakness or strength, both physically and morally; that the life of an individual is not a distinct thing; a special creation; but only a link in a long chain of existence. Here comes Sis."

"Riding a hobby, Ned?" the girl asked affectionately.

"Taking a little canter for mother's benefit," was the reply in a solemn tone, with a bright twinkle of the eye. "But that is not what prevents my going out with you this evening, Ethel. I formed a new acquaintance to-day."

"Has he medical works to sell?" Ethel spoke up, "or one of the cranks who worm themselves into your good graces, by way of getting an invitation to make your house their home while they experiment a little."

"Neither, you bad girl. I like the man. Rather brusque occasionally, I could see, but whole-souled and substantial as a rock. A protégée of his will call to-night for medical advice. She may be late. That is why I must remain at home. What is it? Opera or theater?"

"Neither," Mrs. Parkman replied; "only a call. Some other time will do as well. And dinner is ready."

Dr. Parkman's office hours closed at eight. A few

minutes later Mrs. Tyler came. She had just gone when Richard was admitted.

"I thought it impossible to come to-night," he explained in response to a warm greeting, "but later found I could do so. I felt somewhat interested to know the result. Has Mrs. Tyler seen you?"

"Yes. You would have met her a few minutes earlier."

"And the verdict?"

"She will not have a long life—how long depends on her constitution. She has an incurable malady."

When this subject had been fully considered, Dr. Parkman said: "If you have the time to spare I would like to have you meet my mother and sister," and he led the way to the parlor.

After a few topics of the day naturally following introductions were disposed of, the beauties and eccentricities of Eaton became the topic of conversation.

"We formerly spent a part of our summers there," Mrs. Parkman explained. "I very well remember Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy Hathaway. They belonged to the quaint old-fashioned New England folk, who had too rich a flavor to be lost."

"Do you recall their niece?" Richard questioned.

"Perfectly. The last time I saw her she was a golden-haired little girl, three or four years of age. That was nearly fifteen years ago. I thought her the most beautiful child I ever saw."

"She was recently married to Robert Leighton, from this city, formerly of Providence," Richard replied.

"A school friend of mine at Mrs. Bryan's seminary, Annie Marbury, married a Mr. Leighton," Mrs. Parkman continued, "and he was from Providence."

"That was Robert's father. That city was their home till within a few years."

"I heard of Mrs. Leighton's death some two years ago. Is the father living?" Mrs. Parkman asked.

"He lived but a few months after Mrs. Leighton's death," was the reply. "Robert was the only child. He has made New York his home since his parent's death. In fact the family spent considerable time here for a number of years."

"Is it possible!" Mrs. Parkman exclaimed. "When we accidentally meet acquaintances in Paris or Japan we think the world is very small; but when we often pass old friends in our own city unrecognized, it assumes larger proportions. Ned, is the happy era coming in the evolution of mortals when these limitations will be extended? My son is very much interested in that science," she explained, "so we try to extract consolation from it on all occasions."

"If the future social state would be benefited thereby, if it would denote real progress, it will come to pass," Dr. Parkman declared, "because the most constant characteristic of social changes in the aggregate is from a worse to a better condition."

"This law comes from an inherent tendency to perfection, I suppose," Richard remarked.

"Not at all, in my opinion," was the emphatic declaration. "Progression is not a divine gift. Its prime factors are the community and its environment. That statement involves pages of philosophy and analysis. Doubtless I am called heterodox in all good things, but until we fling creeds and their petty narrowness to the winds, the world's ethical progress halts."

"That requires a generous spirit," Mrs. Parkman suggested.

"I daresay it will come in time, mother. The beast is gradually being eliminated from us. Primitive man,

when creation had progressed so far, had an intense personality; a great sense of his own wishes regardless of others. The modern man already shows a vast extent of progress in that respect. Other things will follow."

Then the conversation took up various sides of the question, shifting now and then to lighter things, till Richard, suddenly remembering he was extending a professional call into a delightful evening's visit, rose to say good-night.

"We are under great obligations to Hiram Foss," Mrs. Parkman said, cordially extending her hand, "and we hope to see you often."

"The obligations are on my part," Richard said sincerely.

Indeed, this idea grew in intensity all the way home. He found himself pondering over many of Ethel's sayings in a way quite unaccountable to a confirmed bachelor. He acknowledged she was not a handsome girl, but inwardly asserted with a positiveness not to be shaken, that she had an attractive face and a charming manner, quiet and gentle like her mother.

"Mr. Benson is delightful, Ned," Mrs. Parkman asserted after their guest had gone, "and refreshingly unconventional. Possibly the friend will influence him to renounce bachelorhood."

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind, mother. I am positive about that."

"Well, he has no business to remain in that state—he could make some one so happy. But, Ned," Mrs. Parkman went on as if from a conscientious duty, "I presume people say the same of you. No mother likes to see another usurp the place she has held, but, I know that a married physician has the advantage over an unmarried one."

"I am too well settled already to have that question enter as a factor. Moreover, little mother, you would be so fastidious about her," the Doctor smiled. "The paragon could never be found."

"Not so fastidious as my son, perhaps," was the retort, as the family separated for the night, the Doctor going to his office for an hour of study.

The chance remark had made more vivid than ever the most beautiful face he had ever seen, with its aureole of golden hair. The vision flashed across his path the day before as he was passing the Academy of Design, in the person of a young girl who tripped down the way, with a countenance glorified from some burning exhilaration over a conscious power within herself. The same enthusiasm rang out in the few words he heard her say to a friend as she entered a carriage and drove away. Through all the subsequent hours that face had hovered about him, and the silence between them was melodious with the harmony of thought. He believed she must be a maiden still unwon; in fact, he scarcely thought of any other alternative. He only knew she had entered into his life, and for once he did not realize that his usually sound judgment might be playing him false; and all this because of that unaccountable thing we call a human heart, with its "throbbings, sobbings, throbbings," of the ages. Sometimes their pulsating emotions steal into the soul with the gentle murmur of the purling brook; again they rush with the fury of a flood, scattering devastation on their way and changing the very channel of existence.

In the privacy of her room Ethel sat, going over one by one the events of the evening, unconsciously lingering the longest with the memory of Richard Benson.

CHAPTER VIII.

A JOURNEY across a world where there were only sea and sky, then swift, bright hours among the most pleasing of Parisian gayeties, followed by a short, intoxicating draught from the fountains of art beneath an Italian sun, and Esther and Robert were home again. To Esther, with the thrilling potentialities awakening within her, it was one long day of beauty silver-tipped by her vivid imagination.

One disappointment came to give a touch of reality. Richard was not there to welcome them on their return, an event which had been looked forward to with much enthusiasm by Esther; for she felt he was the one friend awaiting her who would be specially interested in all her joys.

The night after they sailed he had been summoned to his distant home, on account of his father's illness. The days sped into weeks till more than two months passed before the elder Mr. Benson was pronounced on the sure road to recovery. Then, after attending to many details of business, Richard was able to return to New York, eventually taking all his friends by surprise in arriving a day earlier than he had promised. He felt a great anxiety to know how the new life affected Esther, whether it contributed to her happiness, or if it stole away her native simplicity.

Naturally by this time Robert and Esther were settled in quite a domestic way of living; it was almost like

having one's own home in the means provided for their own privacy and comfort, and for the entertainment of their friends.

One evening as they lingered at the dinner table a welcome step was heard entering the parlor, and a cheery voice calling their names. Richard had come at last.

When Esther went eagerly forward to greet him he recognized, as by a flash of prophetic inspiration, that no amount of luxury or adulation would destroy her healthful, enthusiastic spirit. He also saw that the more complete life had made the fair face still fairer; that she had not simply risen to the new surroundings, but, instead, her own inherent rich nature had been given its proper setting. He knew her artless innocence as yet realized nothing of the jealousies and heartaches and stinging sarcasms over disappointments in society's whirl; or of the fact that even beauty and talent like her own might go unrecognized unless a respectable amount of gold formed a background. The enchantment around her had not poisoned the invigorating freshness and sweet aroma which she had brought from her native hills and woods, and Richard drew a breath of relief over the knowledge that a serpent had not yet entered her Eden.

A full half hour followed with its volley of questions and answers, a veritable feast of soul, before more material affairs came to mind. Then Richard said: "I must apologize for coming so early. Were you through dinner?"

"Indeed we were," Robert answered with animation. "Besides, what is that compared to looking at you once more?"

"But what a pattern of an ideal hostess I am!" Esther exclaimed. "You have not dined yourself."

"Long ago," was the reply. "And now let me ask if you have an engagement this evening."

"I believe not, have we, Robert?" Esther inquired, delighted at the prospect of one of the old enjoyable visits.

"We are wholly and unreservedly at your service, Dick, any length of time you wish," Robert declared.

"Well, then," Richard announced, fumbling in his pockets, "I have a box for Booth to-night."

"A box for Booth!" Robert repeated in astonishment. "What has come over the boy, Esther? Too much of something hath made him mad. You do not understand the inner beauty of that proceeding. Dick usually secures the most secluded seat in the balcony, so as not to be disturbed by any chance bright eyes, as becomes a bachelor."

"You do not seem to comprehend," Richard retorted. "It is in honor of an important event to which I have hitherto been debarred from contributing. My impatience to learn if you deserved it would brook no delay."

Beneath the words Robert detected a special significance, but he lightly said with mock humility: "I understand. Pardon my dullness; but we have become such conventional married people, the object of celebrating our wedding did not occur to me. Esther is fond of the theater and the splendor of it."

"Yet, after all, Esther," Richard lamented, "in my mind it will be a poor affair in comparison with your social successes last summer, notwithstanding Booth's marvelous acting. There will be no sweep of hill and dale with breezes fragrant with new-mown hay; no vine-covered porch where one can sit and dream and plunge his soul in the waters of life-giving nature, for renewed vigor; and no Uncle Eben either," he ended abruptly, smiling.

"But you cannot have these things in winter," Robert solemnly remarked. "We might send for Uncle Eben."

"I am not quite sure whether he would approve of Shakespeare," Esther suggested.

"The trouble with Uncle Eben," Robert put in, "is that he was brought up to believe that Providence rolled the universe along a certain track, and now when it seems to be jumping the rails he feels he must square his shoulder to the wheel to prevent it. But the real religion in his heart forgets all creeds when occasion requires. And that berry patch!" Robert laughed. "The poor man's struggles with conscience and Solomon were pathetically sincere. I knew it would never do to tell him I did not care a picayune for that five hundred dollars, because he would never touch it."

"But did you not care for it?" Esther spoke up quickly in astonishment.

"No, Esther. It was only a prudent forethought; a little investment in case I should need its returns to carry out a certain project. The result came, however, without its help, and Uncle Eben is welcome to the money."

"But the project?" Esther persisted.

"To win Uncle Eben's consent to steal you away from him, my little maid. Gratitude and obligation sometimes conquer great obstacles. But how is business, Richard?" Robert ended, wishing to change the conversation.

"Excellent," was the reply. "My foreman's experience while I was in Eaton last summer served him well. At that time things came near being disastrous; now I find them in good order."

"I must take Esther down to your rooms some day," Robert declared, "and let her see what a lithographer's business is like. She has been accustomed to so many broad acres to breathe in all her life that the poor child

will wonder how you people live down there. Really, Esther, there is ample space for an extensive business, excellent income, and plenty of fresh air because it is up so high."

"But not quite like these rooms," Richard thoughtfully observed, looking critically about him. "They are finer than I supposed."

"I had a few changes made after our return," Robert explained. "And can you not see what makes the real difference?" he went on carelessly. "Esther has a sort of magic that brings out all the capabilities of things. She has only to give a touch here, another there, hang a picture or drape a window, and presto! comfort has taken the place of desolation."

Blushing with so much praise, Esther naturally wished to show the rest of her house, as she expressed it. There was the large sleeping-room, quite unlike the one which still brought great comfort to Aunt Nancy's heart, and scarcely more filled with Esther's exuberant personality. Then she drew the curtains leading to the dining-room, with its abundance of silver and crystal, where there were many curios and rare objects to be admired. She reserved the best for the last. This was an alcove stolen from the parlor and separated from it by heavy draperies. Its principal attraction was an easel by the side of a large window, not the rustic delight from the old studio by the brook, but one of elegant design.

"I began my lessons immediately on my return," Esther explained as the three were seated. She did not add, however, what her instructor had said to her: "Your brush has the stroke of genius. That you cannot help, but how much you accomplish depends upon your earnestness and perseverance." "Necessarily this is only be-

gun," she went on, removing a gauze from the canvas. It is the same subject that I am doing at the Academy under instruction. I practice this alone. I brought complete sketches with me, and models are furnished."

It was a moderately large canvas, on which in the process of portrayal was a charming landscape familiar to them all—the view at the entrance of her rustic Eaton studio.

In the distance was the low range of mountains, with their lights and shadows. At the left were the hills, and between them lay the valley, with its stretch of green meadows. A touch of sunlit clouds and twilight mystery, threw over it a veil of enchantment; while in the foreground, just without the entrance to a bower, were two figures, a youth and a maiden. They had not yet taken on the colorings of real existence, but they, with every other prospective detail, were instinct with life. The sunshine, tinting the masses of cloud with purple and gold, was a reflection of a reverence and brightness in her own being; the breeze fluttering the branches of trees was a breath from an atmosphere hallowed with a mystery of a soul in close communion with nature; while the face of the maiden, more distinctly defined, was illumined with the deep, rich life which makes youth perpetual.

Richard contemplated the picture with silent admiration. He recognized its possibilities, and the capacity of the glowing, impassioned girl before him.

"You have undertaken an arduous piece of work, Esther," he said, "one which requires much study and a careful eye."

"When your heart is in the work it becomes a pleasure," was the reply. "There may be months of toil and disappointment, but what matters if success be at the

end? A famous artist once said when he sold a picture: 'You see but one; there are a dozen beneath it.'"

"Your week in Rome has added to your enthusiasm," Richard said thoughtfully.

"Possibly," Esther admitted. "It certainly gave me a few distinct impressions. One was, that real worth in art must be produced from nobility within; that I must be good if I would be great," she laughed. "Then the face of Beatrice in the Barberini Palace has haunted me. I can conceive of nothing so sad. Yet a touch of the brush might make it happy, just as a stroke here in my own picture could turn the joyousness to sorrow; the same as a sudden blow will change the living face. I am just beginning to taste the bewildering fascination of watching the growth of a living, throbbing personality of one's own creation; of noting its development of soul, and understanding all the secret emotions which produce it as none other can. It must move one to pity when they must depict a storm-tossed heart for the portrayal of tragic pathos, to catch the eye of fancy."

As she finished speaking she impulsively caught up the brush and gave a few strokes to the face on the canvas.

"Then there was the Coliseum," she went on brightly, throwing down the brush. "I imagine nothing new can be said about its weird beauty, but it must strike each individual understanding according to individual elements. I——"

"Please, Esther," Robert interrupted, "let me tell Dick how I came to the conclusion we should have to spend the rest of our natural days wandering among its ruins. It was almost impossible to entice the girl away."

"We were fortunate in seeing it by moonlight," Esther protested in defense. "It was the mysterious whisperings of ages ago that held me. I saw nothing of the present

lights and shadows. The whole arena was full of gay voices and musical laughter, of hysterical sobbing and frenzied grief, of the same panting, struggling, blissful emotions as those of ourselves, for human nature does not change in fundamental qualities, only progresses. I would wonder what became of all that life, and if it were possible it could be forever obliterated; if they lived as a passing dream, and if I were doing the same; just a fleeting breath of reality, nothing more."

Silence followed the passionate words, till Robert, determined to break the spell, said lightly: "Esther persists in seeing and hearing so many things unnoticed by others. It must be very troublesome."

"On the contrary it is delightful," Esther maintained. "When a little girl I always made Aunt Nancy's flour starch for the prints on washing-day. Do you suppose it was starch I made? There would have been no poetry in that. It was always the whitest, most delicious of cakes for my friends. Sometimes they were with me and envied my skill, and frequently it was specially intended for a young man, as I was always grown up and engaged. Love was the one thing I worshipped," she admitted half sadly. "If I were my own housemaid do you think it would be breadmaking and dishwashing and a dozen other labors which I would be doing? Not at all. A hundred beautiful things would take their places."

Then the chatting drifted to other topics till Robert said, looking at his watch: "I think, Esther, it is time for you to dress if we go to the theater."

"I must inquire after Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy," Richard begged. "They have been shamefully neglected. Are they well?"

"Very well," Esther replied.

"Have they forgotten poor Richard?"

"No, indeed. They have sent so many messages to you I cannot give them to-night, as it is getting late."

"And the music?" Richard earnestly queried.

"I continue the vocal lessons. I have a busy life with all the social obligations included. And I have so many studies from life and nature in color and pencil," she added as she rose to leave the room.

"Bear in mind, Esther," Robert said in a bantering tone, "that we three sit in state as sole occupants of a prominent stall, as the English say."

"Wait a moment," Richard quickly interposed. "I suppose I might have bought the whole house that we might have been alone in grandee state, provided I could have found a financial backer. Our tongues have been so glib I forgot to say that I have invited the Parkmans to enjoy the evening with us."

"Who are they?" Esther quickly asked, a little surprised.

"Some very good friends, whose acquaintance I have lately made," Richard said. "Mrs. Parkman was in school with Robert's mother, and naturally desires to see Robert and his wife. Both she and her daughter will call; they would have done so before, but they have been out of town, and, I thought it a convenient season to invite them to meet you. They remember you at the age of three in Eaton, Esther, and they have also pleasant reminiscences of Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy, and ludicrous ones of Hiram Foss. The father is dead. There is one son who is a prominent young physician. Have I sufficiently answered the question?"

"There, there, Esther," Robert hurried as she was about to speak. "Waive questions till another time," and he drew the curtains for her to pass through. When she

left the room both men were sensible of having passed from light into darkness.

"You have seen Dr. Parkman then," Robert said excitedly in a low voice.

"Yes, Robert, I saw him first, the evening after you left New York."

"I suppose you carried out your threatened philanthropy."

"Your supposition is correct, but Dr. Parkman will accept no remuneration."

"What kind of people are the Parkmans?"

"Delightful."

"Have you not placed me in an embarrassing position?"

"Not at all. None of the family know the former name of the Doctor's patient."

"I suppose Mary would accept nothing from me. I am willing now to do something for her."

"No, she would refuse your aid. Have you looked up any business yet?" Richard asked with interest.

"No." Robert flushed beneath his questioner's critical gaze. "You remember our trip was short and since our return I have naturally wanted to give Esther extra attention. Besides, though the girl was so bewitching in her simple Eaton gowns, they were not just what I wanted her to have here. I had to use some logic, however, to persuade her to have a new outfit so soon. Of course I had to escort her around more or less while it was in preparation."

"Um-m. No one will find fault with too much devotion, Robert. After all it is not so much matter about her dress."

"It is really wonderful," Robert said proudly, "how she takes her place in society. She is a favorite already."

"Esther is a queen by nature. Though Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy were old-fashioned, they were refined. She was well brought up. And, Robert," Richard added impressively, "I now hold myself somewhat responsible for her happiness. You promised to have some kind of business and devote your time and interest to it."

"Well, Dick, have I said I would not?"

"No, but you know what procrastination does, and the saw about idle hands. Never mind if the profits are small. Have something agreeable that demands attention. An extra income is not necessary. You have too much of that—unless you take care of it," Richard ended with a side glance at Robert.

"You are also living in a much more expensive way than I supposed," he went on, when there was no response. "Esther enjoys a luxurious life, it is an outlet for her rich nature, but she is neither indolent nor frivolous nor selfish, and would not approve of it if she understood all the circumstances. Her eagerness in her painting means hard work. You certainly ought to do as much real labor as she. She is too warm-hearted and noble not to forgive human frailties; but a lapse which would reveal rottenness at the core—well, you promised me so faithfully, Robert. I trusted you, and you deceived me, but you have a chance many would work years for."

To Robert's relief Esther entered with wraps already on. The carriage was immediately announced and they were soon on their way to the Parkmans. While Richard was introducing his guests a woman came down the steps and passed swiftly down the street. Robert withdrew into the shelter of the carriage, while Richard bowed.

"That is your friend, I believe, Mr. Benson," Mrs. Parkman observed as she comfortably settled herself in

the carriage, which was large enough for all without crowding. "A few other people are waiting. Ned will join us later."

Mrs. Parkman did not have a clear view of Robert's bride till they were taking their seats in the theater; then she believed she had never seen one so beautiful. She was not surprised at a ripple of curiosity and unconscious homage throughout the house; but Esther herself noticed nothing of it. All her life she had looked upon the same coloring and features in her mirror and she had become accustomed to them; besides, she could not compare them with others around her. It was always difficult to describe her dress; for whatever it might be, it was invariably subordinate to the face rising like a flower above it. It served only to bring into striking relief the crown of golden hair, the delicious tint of brow and cheek, and the exquisite moulding of the bust, with its rounded shoulders and pretty curves of throat.

The play was *Othello*. Even *Desdemona* might well be envious. She could not have chided her fair listener, however, for want of attention, for Esther watched the fated web ever being more closely drawn around its helpless victim, with a strange fascination.

Dr. Parkman arrived during the interval before the scene in which *Desdemona* is cruelly put to death. He first sought an acquaintance, for whom he had an important message, and chanced to stand for a moment opposite his own party. While acknowledging their greetings he caught a glimpse from behind the draperies of the face which haunted him. Three times it had passed him like a fleeting vision ever eluding him. Smiling at the certainty of success, he hastened to his friends and was introduced to this lady of his dreams—Mrs. Robert Leighton.

This sudden awakening to reality was a blow to every fiber of his manhood, for he realized the struggle through which he must pass; moral weakness was a thing entirely outside his consideration.

"What makes you so pale, Ned?" his mother whispered. "Are you not well?"

"Perfectly well," was the cheery reply. "The air seems a trifle close after the delicious breeze outside."

There was only time for a brief chat when the marvelous personations on the stage again engaged every one's whole attention. Throughout the remainder of the tragedy Esther was not looking into cloudland across the footlights; it was a real world to her, and pain and grief from whatever cause are always alike in their cruelly piercing agony.

"Have you thoroughly enjoyed it, Esther?" Richard asked at the close.

"It was wonderful," she replied, with moist eyes and trembling lips. "Naturally I have never seen a play so fine. I doubt if one can ever see anything better."

"I knew we should need lighter entertainment after this to restore normal condition," Robert said, helping Esther adjust her wraps. "A supper on our own table is awaiting us."

"I demurred at such an arrangement," Richard explained, "and insisted on playing host at a certain café in which we all delight, but I was overruled by a majority of one," he laughed, looking at Esther.

"We have been told, Mrs. Leighton, that woman's judgment is undeniably the better," Dr. Parkman gallantly replied, "and now it has been proved. From this moment I am a convert to woman suffrage."

"The wisdom of your change of faith must be proved by experience, therefore you will be obliged to accompany

us," Esther returned with animation. "We shall find an extra carriage ready for us. We were fearful we would lose your company."

An instant Dr. Parkman was seized with an impulse to turn and flee as if for his life. He was amazed and mystified that this girl, a supposed maiden, had crept so closely to his heart, and had figured so conspicuously in his future plans. There was no reason in it, and for that lapse of judgment he must pay the penalty. Yet, how she had taken the citadel by storm while he slept! A second thought suggested that cowardly shrinking would not make him master of himself; it would probably only lead him back with less strength to run again; he must face the fact of renunciation and become the master. It would be easier with the insurmountable barrier of right than without it, and with a voice wholly unruffled from the storm of passion within him, he gracefully expressed his pleasure at being able to accompany them.

Esther was a charming hostess.

The conversation at first dwelt upon dramas in general and the one just given in particular.

"I was wondering," Esther answered, when rallied from a momentary absorption, "whether Desdemona, if she could have been restored to life, could forgive the crime committed against her love. She fully trusted; and in her great love, she never dreamed there could be deception in return."

Robert flushed at the unexpected remark. Richard cast a furtive glance at Esther, but he saw there was no hidden meaning beneath the words.

"Esther's faith in human nature has never been weakened," he said, somewhat troubled.

Dr. Parkman read the sincerity and innocence underlying Esther's thought, and quickly replied.

"Forgiveness to be genuine must comprise so many other qualities. I came across this idea the other day: 'The being forgiven may perish, but the one who forgives never dies.' I interpreted it to mean the spirit of forgiving, fostered and cultured, would leave an impress, and convey an impulse, which would give rise to other like impulses, and so go on in little waves of far-reaching effect; perhaps never die in results."

"One might forgive a crime, a sin," Esther continued thoughtfully, "but a breach of trust denotes decay at the very core of principle."

"And sin is so elastic a word," Richard admitted, with assumed carelessness. "Bounded by one's bringing up and creed. What definition do you give the word, Dr. Parkman?"

"A violation of nature," was the prompt reply. "A course of thought or action, wilfully pursued, which throws one out of balance with his environment, and thus detracts from his physical or moral completeness of life."

"But one can repent of all these things," Robert answered nervously, "and be forgiven even at the last moment."

"That is the old theory," was the earnest reply. "The new one recognizes no reparation for sin once committed. Repentance cannot ward off punishment. Those principles which we call sacred are involved in the very nature of life itself; and the obligation to conform to them has its authority from the perpetual revelation of divine power."

"You are making us too serious, Ned," Mrs. Parkman advised, affectionately. "Of course every one has more or less to pardon in every-day life, but we are speaking as if it were a personal matter of importance. Perhaps

great forgiveness on the part of one may have an effect on the moral nature, similar to fresh mountain air on the physical. Its elixir and ozone are so exhilarating they throw petty troubles into forgetfulness. They would tend to make one grow and expand, and find he has a soul."

"But," Esther quickly responded, "the mountain might be so high that one could not live in the rarefied air. There must be a limit to righteous forgiveness." She was only following out what seemed a logical conclusion. "And my first question still remains unanswered," she smiled.

The topics, however, were not all of a serious nature. The news of the day, the latest novel, reminiscences of Eaton, sparkling repartee, each received in turn its share of attention, and the time for saying good-night came only too soon.

Richard lingered a moment after the others had gone.

"You have the happy faculty of extracting all the sweet there is in life," he said to Esther. "Your imagination transforming everything to suit your own needs. Which of your blessings do you prize the most? Is it the intoxication of the world's homage as society's queen?" he asked, with intense earnestness ringing in the words.

"No, Richard, it is not, though that is pleasing to every one, but those things are accidental; often the result of favorable environment. If I could win honor there," pointing to her studio, "it would be gained from something within myself, a personality which neither poverty nor affluence could change; the result of delightful rambles among thoughts and emotions and aspirations granted by earnest endeavor. I should like that better."

"The best of all things?" Richard further queried, aware that he was holding Robert's attention.

"No," Esther thoughtfully replied, not seeing the things that were, but looking into far-away distances whither none could follow. "No," she repeated, "I love Love the best of anything; Love never deceives; anything which can do that is not Love. It beautifies and brightens all things. Without it they become as husks. At least, this is how it seems to me," she acknowledged, looking at Richard. "Perhaps I am composed of atoms ever tempest-tossed," she smiled. "Ethel Parkman might see differently. What a sweet, pretty girl she is, and not so quiet on acquaintance."

"No," Richard replied, "she is wide awake enough, but wholly unlike yourself."

"I shall like her," Esther said.

"So shall I," Richard returned, and left so abruptly that Robert exclaimed: "What in the world is the matter with Dick?"

Esther remained silent, but an idea crept into her thoughts.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN it became known that Robert and Esther were settled in the city, the acquaintances of Robert's father welcomed them and gave them an assured position; and there were new associates, including a few choice friends, all of which made social obligations delightful. There was no exhausting round of pleasure, but enough to give a piquant flavor to the whole. Esther royally responded to the requirements of the new life. Her kindness of heart, which was not an imitation, soon made her a favorite. Her quick discernment and assimilation of conventional etiquette, united with confidence in herself, gave to her natural grace and queenly air an unusual attractiveness; while her beauty was of so superior a kind there was never a thought of envy or jealousy. It shone like a star and homage was paid to its power.

She was learning that money held an important place in the world's estimation, but this did not spoil her fresh, sweet nature. Shimmering satins and real laces appealed to her artistic sense, as did rich tones and soft lights and harmonious sounds. Yet, though there had already been a few paragraphs in the papers relative to the beauty and wealth of the young Mrs. Leighton, the lines referring to her zeal and prospective honor as an artist gave much greater satisfaction; that was an acknowledgment of herself, of an ability which no money could buy.

Then, when bright spring days succeeded winter, Rich-

ard had often come, and the three had enjoyed delightful country rides and excursions to the beach in place of other gayeties. All these enjoyments were still hers. There was no outward change in her daily life, yet one morning she could no longer refuse to admit to herself that an indescribable something had dimmed its brightness. There was another thought that until now she had never allowed to take definite form—she could not hide from her clear insight of justice that there was one person a little dearer to Robert than herself, and that person was Robert Leighton. She drove away the thought as unworthy of her, opening the window for a draught of the delicious air, and then a twinge of conscience softened the rebuke. After all hers was a happy life. It was not more of the pleasures but more of Robert himself she would like, but while she was mourning over his neglect was she wholly blameless in the matter of giving one's time and thought to others? Had the old life lost its charm? Had she not been negligent in not giving more of herself to the dear old couple who watched and waited for a word from her?

Astonished that she could have entertained disloyal ideas of her husband, self-condemnation mingling with the humming of a lively air, she quickly rose and began a letter to Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy. It grew under the inspiration of the moment, and was the expression of the old Esther and the new Esther combined. She was unconscious a low minor chord occasionally sounded through the gay music, which the readers attributed to regret for their own loneliness, in the memories of the simple home and girlhood days.

The writing had seemed to throw off all morbid feeling, and when the missive was folded and addressed, Esther determined upon a ride to the Park, not in a car-

riage, but a Fifth Avenue stage. In this way she could wander about at her own will and return at luncheon. Robert was not coming, indeed, he seldom came now, and it would not matter if she were late.

She had alighted from the stage and was standing a moment at one side just within the entrance, when a carriage drawn by a pair of spirited bays passed out. On one seat were two gentlemen whom she did not know. Facing them was Robert, engaged in earnest conversation. He had not noticed her, while the one searching glance she had given his companions assured her they were not of her world. The thought that they, or others like them, might be the cause of his neglect of her, made her shudder.

Somehow the sun was less bright, the air less fresh, and suddenly she had lost all interest in the passers-by. With a sigh she turned and was soon home again, where she deliberately sat down to have the battle out with herself. A brief moment Hiram Foss's words to Uncle Eben flashed across her mind with vivid intensity; then, the strong, clear sincerity of her own frank nature asserted itself and declared that love could never deceive, and there should not be a shadow of suspicion against her husband; a few cruel words and evasive replies from Robert stung, nevertheless, but she quickly put on her hat again and started for the Parkmans. She had become very intimate with Ethel and her mother and had a standing invitation to lunch with them whenever convenient. She found Mrs. Parkman out and Ethel said the Doctor would not be in till later. Over their chocolate and salad the girls discussed the fashions both old and new; then, when they returned to the parlor they took up the latest magazines, entertainments for the coming week, and divers bits of news, regardless of time,

until they were made aware of it by the return of Mrs. Parkman and the Doctor, accompanied by a friend, who was introduced as Mrs. Bristol.

Esther seldom met Dr. Parkman. He seemed to avoid her at his own house, absent himself from hers under cover of the excuse of patients, and, if by chance they met at entertainments, he would excuse himself after a brief greeting.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mrs. Leighton," Mrs. Bristol strongly asserted as they were introduced. "I have often heard of you, and I am sure you will be interested in my mission."

"Mrs. Bristol is organizing a club, Esther," Mrs. Parkman explained. "She waylaid us almost at our own door, and we had given her your name as one who might become interested. What is the name of the society, Mrs. Bristol?"

"It is not named yet," was the reply. "It is still an infant. Wait till we see whether the youngster lives and thrives."

"Who is the President?" the Doctor asked.

"I am obliged to hold that office," Mrs. Bristol modestly admitted, "and also at present to be secretary and treasurer and give the vote to prevent a tie in a membership of three. I am fortunate in finding you, too, Doctor," she went on unreservedly, "for you are a consistent philanthropist, if many do call you a heathen on account of your espousal of new scientific ideas."

Dr. Parkman flushed, but, turning to Esther, said: "Mrs. Bristol is really neither so complimentary nor the opposite, as her words would indicate. It is her way of referring to my enthusiasm in the questions of the day among thinkers. By the way, have you yet become interested in Evolution?"

"Very little, perhaps because I know so little about it," was the reply.

"Then you have a most delightful field open for recreation. The mystery of it all will appeal to your imagination, for science cannot do away with the mystery attached to the truth it explains, and mystery is something which always attracts human nature. I think it quite as wonderful for the infinitesimally small cell to gasp and breathe and live beneath the look of power, and thus usher in the birth of creation, as for it to come in any other way. But, Mrs. Bristol, let us hear your wants?"

"In the first place," Mrs. Bristol began animatedly, "I am not slumming. I am working for those who are not what we call poverty-stricken and who are not outcasts, but respectable members of a community. For instance, I know a young woman, intelligent, refined, fond of literary advantages, whose soul hungers for appropriate food. She has enough bread and butter, and comfortable clothing, but she has to earn them herself. That is all she does have or can have. She lives a cheerless, humdrum existence, keeping soul and body together. She would not accept charity, but a ticket to a good lecture, opera, or play, brighten her thoughts for weeks, and if sent by an unknown friend is readily accepted. There are hundreds of such cases, old and young, married and single, and of both sexes. There are starving souls from lack of means, as well as hungry stomachs; and I believe a little soul nourishment to such ones is much more beneficial in the end than soup to the slums."

"Well, Mrs. Bristol," Dr. Parkman said, looking at his watch, "I shall have to leave you, but as I have faith in your judgment and sincerity I will add my mite to your fund, though you must not enroll me as a member. You must manage the machinery without my name, but any-

thing which will add happiness to a single sorrowing, struggling soul is to be commended," and he handed her a bank note. After a few words with Esther he left the room.

"Ned is a good boy," his mother proudly asserted. "He occasionally ruffles me, requesting assistance or sympathy or shelter, when it interferes with the precise running of household machinery; then, I remember it may be the only chance given me to scatter a little sunshine into the life of that particular individual, or enable him to broaden his views. It is the grief of the heart which Ned likes best to help; sorrow and sin rather than physical needs; I conclude, usually, that the sweeping of a room can be postponed."

"That particular sweeping could be skipped entirely, for once," Mrs. Bristol brusquely declared. "Scrubbings are ever at hand for Martha. And now let us hear what you will do for us, Mrs. Leighton, as I, too, must be on the wing."

"I shall have to follow Dr. Parkman's example," Esther replied, as Mrs. Bristol rose to leave. "Here is a small sum I will contribute, but I will not join till I have consulted Mr. Leighton."

"There are societies and societies," Mrs. Parkman remarked when the caller was gone. "I think Mrs. Bristol's may be a praiseworthy one."

"I fear she has interfered with my success in obtaining Esther's consent to join our new club," Ethel lamented. "We cannot have the conventional club gatherings and discuss the amount accomplished, as that would be too personal, but we are to meet once in two weeks and give experience, whether we find it helpful or not. You know people have so many imaginary troubles," Ethel went on, "so many little things of no

account in the great whole of life, over which we wear out our nerves. The object is to sift out these, and bring us to realize better what real trouble means. We are to select a book, or fix upon a certain piece of work, and devote a certain number of minutes a day for every petty vexation that we allow ourselves to be worried over. Or when we say unkind words, or grieve people with things, like putting the house in a hurricane because your dress-maker disappointed you; or making every one uncomfortable because your cook leaves suddenly, and you have to prepare a simple meal yourself; or if those you love do not always do as you think they ought, and you get in a temper."

"I will give my answer later," Esther replied. "However, I think you are not in particular need of that kind of education, Ethel; you always seem so composed and restful."

"We have lost our private chat, which is always so delightful," Mrs. Parkman regretted, as Esther adjusted her wraps preparatory to leaving them. "You must run over to-morrow."

Esther returned home with a light heart. Contact with new influences had dulled the restless feeling in her heart, and she was ever ready to accept brightness rather than shadow. It was later than she thought. She chose for dinner a gown which Robert specially liked, ordered a favorite dish, and personally attended the decorations of the table. Then she sat down to think over the afternoon. She had learned a little about societies and clubs and was all aglow over the new channels of experience. She planned many pleasant accessories to them, and remembered how in the first months of marriage Robert had preferred an evening of reading or singing with her to going out. She must have been at fault herself in

some way; she would more carefully study her impulses and actions. Smiling at the flattering conclusion she opened the piano. She tried a few new pieces, gradually running into old favorites till she found herself singing the air:

*"Come where my love lies dreaming,
Dreaming the happy hours away."*

Instantly she was back in the old home again. Dick and Aunt Nancy and Uncle Eben were chatting in the old-fashioned kitchen. The sweet scent of new-mown hay came with the cool breeze. Robert's breath was on her cheek and love-light in his eye; they were fresh from their plighted troth, being borne along into a new world.

Before the lines were finished she heard Robert's step. With tears in her eyes and smiles on her lips she rose to meet him, penitent and humble. But when he entered, the ominous frown which had so many times puzzled her of late was more threatening than usual, and chilled every atom of ardor in her greeting. He was totally oblivious to all the affectionate remembrances and inquired if dinner were ready.

The meal passed almost silently, but at its close, after the servant had gone, Esther determined to drive away the gloom, and aroused herself to give quite a graphic account of Mrs. Bristol's scheme and Ethel's club, and to depict glowingly her newly-awakened interest in science.

Robert listened in apathy till she had finished, then said: "Nonsense, Esther. I do not wish you to have anything to do with clubs or societies. In the first place they are gotten up solely for amusement, with a great headline of virtues as pretense, and you have amusement enough. Besides, I shall want a little of you myself."

"You have not cared for much of my company lately," she ventured, remembering many lonely evenings very late into the night.

The thrust struck home.

"Esther," Robert replied fiercely in a metallic voice, "it is as well that you understand my affairs will bear no dictation. If business detain me till midnight or morning there is no help for it, and it is not necessary for you to trouble yourself in the least."

For a moment Esther's eyes blazed with righteous indignation, but controlling it she said in a quiet voice: "I did not know you had entered into any business."

"No," Robert hurled out, "you did not. I did not intend you or any one not concerned should know of it; but you came home so full of nonsense, and accused me of neglect, I blurted it out. You must learn not to be so enthusiastic over things."

"What is the business?" Esther asked, not minding the command.

Robert rose and paced the room full five minutes before replying, then: "You have a faint idea of what the Stock Exchange is, have you not?"

"Yes, very faint," was the smiling reply. Doubts had begun to vanish. "I know it is something about bears, and if that is why you have become one I will have nothing to do with it."

"And you understand what a broker is?" Robert went on hurriedly.

Yes, I think I know something about it."

"Well, then, I have opened a broker's office downtown." The lie slipped off his tongue with no remorse whatever.

"Does Dick know of it?" Esther questioned.

"No. And you must promise me solemnly you will not tell him until I give you my permission."

"But is this right? To have a secret from Dick?"

Robert winced at the question, but carelessly replied, "He might try to influence me out of it. I do not want to be. I want to experiment a little."

"And if you fail? And his advice would have saved you? And you have to confess with apologies of penitence?"

"It would not be the first time Dick has had to forgive my lack of confidence." There was a sarcasm in the words Esther did not detect.

"I think at least you should have had more confidence in me," Esther said earnestly, impulsively rising and going to Robert. "I have a confession to make. I have had many strange thoughts and upbraidings for you, when, if I had known what troubled you, that you were not really changed——"

"Why did you marry me, Esther?" Robert interrupted.

"Because I was supposed to love you?"

"And why did you suppose to love me?"

"Because I thought you were kind, true, capable and honest; kind and gentle as a maiden; true as the needle to pole; capable to meet and conquer obstacles and temptations on life's journey, and an honest, noble work of God."

"You saw me as in a mirror of your own sweet self," Robert asserted, with a sudden recklessness of results. "You place one on too high a pedestal for him to stay there. I am just what I was when I wooed and won you." He almost laughed aloud at the innocent construction she would place on such an assertion. "Do you not see, therefore, you have been looking through distorted eyes? That you are the one at fault?"

A remembrance that Robert always reasoned this way, to lay on her the blame if there were any, for a brief instant flashed through her mind; then it was forgotten, and she stood penitent and pleading.

"And really, Esther, I must go now. You give me your promise in regard to Dick, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, do not sit up for me."

When Robert was gone Esther read till the little silver clock on the mantel struck eleven, then she retired, though it was a long time before she could sleep; but she did not hear Robert when he came in just at dawn.

CHAPTER X.

THE radical change in Robert which made Esther's life unhappy had come suddenly, although its manifestations were for awhile held in check. He no longer seemed to have any interest in her art of which he had been so proud; her voice no longer charmed when she sang; excuses were frequently made to account for his absence when friends were their guests; regrets were more and more often sent in return for invitations; and what hurt the most deeply of all were the unkind, even cruel words, unsparingly given. An unrest, a secret demon, had led him away from her.

For a time the idea of the engrossing attentions of business sufficed to dispel the gray clouds and once more flood the earth with sunshine, but even this lost its power. It was a strange rival, Esther thought with the shadow of a smile, a husband's business office; but it gradually appropriated to itself the whole of her husband's time, aside from a few hours of sleep, his whole interest, good nature, life. What more could any rival do?

As for self, she sought to unravel the tangle of life in more hard work and absorption in the pleasures which remained. She never for a moment doubted Robert's word as to the nature of the business in which he was engaged, but she no longer believed it was responsible for lonely days and nights, or the harsh criticisms of so much

he once praised. She was conscious that her love was dying, and trembled at the thought.

Early one afternoon she sat by the window thinking over the problem, half numbed with the grief in her heart, half watching the street below. She must have remained a much longer time than she realized. At last a child's crying attracted her attention. It was a wee bit of a girl clinging to its mother's dress. She would have been pretty with care. The woman was one of a small group of musicians, and was clean and wholesome. The baby looked so tired and was so small. It was not an ugly cry it made, but more of a sob, as if its little heart were grieved. To Esther it seemed like an echo from her own and so little would soothe it. In an instant she was on the walk.

"How much do you earn an hour?" she asked the woman.

The woman started in surprise; even the baby seemed influenced by so beautiful a face and voice.

"Sometimes more, sometimes less," was the answer, "but about twenty-five cents a good day."

"Now," Esther said, "if you will take your baby—is it too cool this warm day to sit across in the square?"

"Ah, no, Missis, it is warm, very nice and warm."

"Well, if you will take the baby and sit there one hour and let it sleep I will give you twice twenty-five cents."

"You are too good, Missis," was the glad reply, as the woman picked up the child.

"Wait a moment," Esther requested. She returned to her room for a woollen shawl.

"The little girl may have this, and here are some bonbons when she awakes."

When the hour was out Esther threw a long wrap over her morning dress and went in search of her *protégées*.

They were both fast asleep. She touched the woman's shoulder.

"Here is your money," she said, "but you must not come to me again. You will not find me." She had just remembered hearing some friends' unpleasant experience in similar matters.

When she again reached her rooms, she found Robert awaiting her.

"A fine escapade you have been having," he said angrily. "It is very agreeable to hear in the corridors about the beautiful Mrs. Leighton's select companions," he added.

The poise of the head was a little more proud, but Esther simply answered, "Doubtless it was wrong. I had not thought of disgracing you. I will be more careful in the future."

"You must be. You must learn, Esther, that you cannot do here as in a small country town. Our beggars in rags have bank accounts. You must let wiser heads investigate matters, and not be imposed upon. The act was a very silly one."

"It was not that I thought of giving the woman money. She may not need it. She was not a beggar. I wanted to give her some comfort. I thought only of that."

"Well, it cannot be helped now. You must have more consideration and think what people will say. Be less impulsive. I came up to order an extra dinner. I shall bring two men home with me. I hope you will not sulk and spoil it all."

The hot tears rose to Esther's eyes, but she bit her lip and stifled the rebellious answer. Her self-control irritated Robert the more.

"You make it deucedly unpleasant," he went on. "You think only of your own likes and dislikes. I believe

you are the most selfish person I ever knew. I want you to look your best to-night, and entertain in your most charming manner. There is much involved and it is necessary to be more than hospitable."

"You will find everything ready. I will carry out your wishes as far as possible."

The words were calm, but how much longer could they remain so? A pang of remorse flushed through Robert's conscience, as he looked into the sad, wistful eyes; but he gave it no heed, and with the kind word unspoken, he hurried away.

The most fastidious could have found no fault with the results of Robert's request. The flowers and all the appointments gave evidence of thoughtful study. Esther chose an evening gown of sea-green silk, which shimmered beneath white puffs of gauze with crystal drops. Her only ornament was a cluster of water lilies on the corsage, while the shadow on the heart gave a pensive sweetness to her features.

When the guests arrived with Robert, she thought their entrance was more boisterous than she was accustomed to hear; an oath jarred on her nerves as a glimpse revealed them to be her husband's companions in the Park. When she appeared to greet them, however, every atom of chivalry and refinement in their natures responded to her loveliness. Robert introduced them as Mr. Adams from the West, and Señor Mazetta from a city in Mexico.

With the beginning of dinner, Esther was unfortunate in selecting topics for conversation. She touched upon the news of the day, in which there was either little interest or ignorance. She tried various entertainments, literature, a season in New York, with no better success. Robert was growing nervous.

"Mr. Adams is engaged in mining," he explained, "and Señor Mazetta has not been in our country long enough to become interested in our New York gossip."

With this cue, Esther's tact in always placing her guests at their ease and calling out the best in them, produced the right atmosphere. She was an attentive listener as a question now and then led to the experience of one, who had begun in the mines with pick and spade, and had risen to be a respectable shareholder; while it was both an easy and a delightful transition, to have interesting accounts of Mexican life and customs from Señor Mazetta. She partly forgot that their faces indicated a character not quite congenial.

After the dinner was successfully ended, she remembered some old engravings of mining scenes which proved to be much admired, and at Robert's request she sang a few of her sweetest ballads. When the ordeal was finally over, and the gentlemen arose to leave, with sincere regrets that they could no longer enjoy her hospitalities, she could have demanded half their kingdom, and it would have been given.

After their departure in company with Robert, Esther's self-control gave way. She realized her success, and knew that Robert was more than pleased with her happy fulfillment of his solicitations. But why did he wish it? What were these men to him? How were they connected with his business that they needed to be shown so much courtesy? She had been led to believe it was stocks in which Robert was so interested; yet the Stock Exchange closed early in the day.

Removing her dress for a negligée, she lay down upon the couch. The sobs and tears would persist in coming, but after awhile in her young weariness, she fell into a sound sleep, and did not awaken when Robert returned.

He came in quietly and watched her for a moment. Then he noiselessly stepped into the dining room. The alcohol lamp stood ready to light, and a plain salad of Esther's own preparation was tempting. Everything about the evening lunch he so much enjoyed had been remembered. He returned to look at the sleeping girl, so young and true and innocent. There was a grieved look around the mouth even in her dreams. A sharp pain of remorse startled his conscience at the betrayal of her trust in him, and the broken promises made to Richard. He stooped to kiss away a tear on her cheek and awoke her.

"Esther," he said with kindness in his tone, "you must not sit up this way. You must not lose your youth. There is none so beautiful as you," he added, thoughtfully.

The cloud had lifted more suddenly than it came. Looking at Robert's face above her, a confused idea ran through her mind of what could be so much more potent in its influence for good or ill than either herself, his friends, or the enjoyable life about them, but she was ready to meet the penitent graciously.

Women do these things—for a season. Why? Is it an heredity developed from the humility of ages of false teaching, placing her as the mother of all misery to humanity? or in the evolution of what we call soul, is it a growth from a germ of great forbearance and forgiveness implanted in the beginning by the great Director, as a significant factor in the mother of mankind?

CHAPTER XI.

"I BELIEVE we decided to send regrets for the Harleston reception," Esther said at breakfast the next morning.

The suddenly clear sky in the home atmosphere of the night before still remained, yet she made the remark with inward trembling, lest a rude answer should jar her nerves.

"We will reverse the decision, Esther. We will accept," Robert replied, joyously. "I am going to take a rest a few days and am at liberty. I have forgotten when it is to be."

"To-morrow night."

"Have you a dress ready?"

"Yes, a new one. I had it made for an emergency."

"You are fond of society, are you not, Esther?"

"Certainly I am."

"You like admiration and dress and all the other accessories?" Robert questioned almost eagerly.

Esther looked up in surprise. "I am a woman," she laughed, "and I am still young. Can I do otherwise than plead guilty?"

"Yet, you do not fully appreciate your advantages, I fear. You are just beginning to realize how very beautiful you are, for one thing, and you do not prize the distinction as you ought."

Esther laughed. "But, Robert," she said, "you must

remember that if I really possess beauty I have always had it, the same as an eye or a hand, and everyday blessings are not always appreciated."

"And then you do not care so very much about the distinction of being the best dressed and most charming of entertainers, and the thousand and one things which money brings. I wish you liked them above everything," Robert ended emphatically.

"Why?"

"Because I could furnish them for you. I cannot provide a taste for art and music and books and—a heart; nor a New England conscience either. Naturally I am jealous of your ancestors."

"Those things are the meat of life, Robert," Esther said, surprise deepening. "The others are the dessert. You would not have me live on sweetmeats? They are unhealthful. Is that the way you read me? And have I disappointed you?"

"No, you have not disappointed me. You are a good girl, Esther. I am proud of you."

Robert was quite honest in this expression of his present mood. What could she do but accept the fact? Her faith in him was not yet wholly shaken, and a little root-let of that hardy plant is so tenacious of life.

"Perhaps you wholly misunderstand me yet," Esther began to explain. "When I had my eighth birthday party it was not Aunt Nancy's cakes and preserves of which I was the most proud; it was some delicious plebeian ginger-snaps of my own make, which I insisted on having. In school it was what I could do, not what I could have, which most stirred my pride, and the same spirit remains with me. I need to humble myself. I am too proud over being able to excel in what others cannot do, but it is more satisfactory. A humdrum exist-

ence of a monotonous round of all dull tones would be exasperating; yet, the things of which you speak and the things of which I speak would all have a sense of unreality if the heart were hungry," she ended half unconsciously.

"Well, Esther, I want to say a few words to you," Robert began, playing with his coffee spoon, which seemed to need his attention. "You must not expect I can always be with you. You do not wish me to be. Surely your time, at least much of it, is so well occupied you can dispense with my services with no compunctions of conscience. There is your painting," he went on, gaining courage to look into her eyes. "Of course I cannot go to the Academy with you. They might take me for a model. What a poor one I would make," he laughed. "I have had my warning that the hours in your own studio must not be disturbed. I couldn't sit here like a figurehead, trembling lest I should forget and run in to look at you."

"You are an ungrateful boy," Esther interrupted, with the old glad light in the beautiful eyes. "You know I am ready to give up anything for you."

"Then you have your rides in the Park with this one and that one," Robert continued, pleased to see the sunlight in Esther's thoughts. "You would call a man's presence superfluous. And there are your chatty visits back and forth with the Parkmans, and a morning concert and matinée occasionally thrown in."

"It is not these things, Robert," Esther ventured, a faint shadow lurking in the eyes. "I do not expect you to give me yourself during the day. I do not wish you to do so in a general way. I would rather feel that you are accomplishing something. But I get very lonely in the evenings. I am lonely then without you, no mat-

ter where I am ; and I cannot always be going about with friends. Besides, I do not always want to be out. I like my own home too well." She did not mention the unkind words whose hurt still pained her.

"You are a good girl, Esther," And Robert went around to emphasize the statement with a caress. "But," he added, "business is business. You must learn to accept the fact."

"You have never explained the business, Robert, so that I can understand it."

"I cannot, Esther. You have not been initiated into the ups and downs of stocks, and the constant watch of the wire-pulling necessary to keep above board, besides the little schemes of railroads and mining corporations ; then there are the manipulations of Congress."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, lobbying expresses it fairly well. Influencing and hiring Congressmen and Senators to vote as the big sharks wish them to do. The little ones have to be 'middlin' s pry,' to use Uncle Eben's phrase."

"I did not suppose members of the highest bodies of our government could be bought."

"You have much to learn, Esther."

"Why not drop it altogether? I believe it all a dishonorable way of living."

"Oh, no. You are too sweeping in your accusation," Robert maintained. "Your horizon is too limited. My father left me a respectable fortune. I like to increase it and I enjoy the excitement of doing it. So far I have been fortunate. What else could I do? As a tradesman I should be a stupendous failure. It is too late for a profession."

"Why?"

"Am I not a married man?"

"Am I not a married woman?" Esther laughingly retorted, "and I am pursuing mine."

"You do not have to earn your bread and steak by it," Robert protested.

"Neither would you. We need not live in this expensive way."

"But you like it, and so do I."

"Yes, I know. When you had mastered some calling, you could earn a great deal of money in a more honorable way; at least so it appears to me. What little I know about it, it seems too much like gambling."

Robert started, while a deep flush covered his brow.

"I could not succeed in a profession, Esther," he said. "I have not a single talent in that direction."

"You do not know till you try. And with the right incentive you could do so much to make the world better. If Congress were to be bought, see that it was bought for the right side."

"You are delicious, Esther," Robert answered, half abstractedly, half earnestly. "We have early breakfasts," he added, looking at his watch.

"We must have late ones, dear, if we are so late in beginning our sleep."

"Well, I must go now. I shall be in to luncheon to-day. Order a salad and some macaroni. Have it ready at half-past one sharp."

When Robert was gone and Esther was dressing for the Academy, a confused tangle of ideas perplexed her. What had caused the sudden transformation in Robert's conduct? What was this, outside of herself, of her love and virtue, which could produce it? If these had been powerless to prevent the neglect and unkindness, what greater power had the strength to banish them? With the subtle divination of a sensitive temperament, she

never for a moment believed another had usurped her place in Robert's affections. She began to hate a business which made his nature as changeable as a chameleon. She would conscientiously attend to it, and leave the consequences till the actual results were known, then face them. If disastrous she would help bear them.

But when she went down to her carriage, the crisp air, the sunshine, and the ever hurrying crowd, which in itself is intoxicating, drove the unpleasant speculations from her mind, and allowed her optimistic disposition to have full sway. In a delightful present, the pain of the past is more easily forgotten, and she worked with renewed zeal. Her lesson for the day was on the landscape, her great picture so dearly prized. Her remarkable skill was able to give a delicious burst of sunlight through the clouds, from the sudden illumination within herself. She felt her execution had never been better, and in answer to the inspiration she remained an hour longer than usual.

She had but just returned, and added the finishing touches which gave their luncheons a special daintiness, when Robert's step was heard outside. She listened with anxiety lest the morning should prove a dream. She had come to dread a certain listlessness in Robert's home-coming, because it was always accompanied with a frown so gloomy and querulous, that cheerfulness would not penetrate it through the day. But the dread vanished at the brisk and cheery step, in harmony with Robert's greeting when he entered.

"Here is a trifle for you to wear to-morrow night," he said, after kissing her, tossing a small package in her lap, while he passed on to the studio.

"A box from Tiffany's!" Esther exclaimed on removing the wrapping.

Within, nestling on its satin bed, flashed an exquisite diamond ornament for her corsage. She had felt herself possessed of great worldly splendor in the contemplation of the jewels on her fingers, two of them, and a valuable ornament for her hair. Her admiration for them, and satisfaction in them, had been a standing joke between Robert and herself. But this gift was so beautiful and unique. Then an ugly thought crept into her mind. Was it a peace offering? Did Robert believe the past could be blotted out with glittering gems? Did he think a wound in her love could be healed with trinkets? A dim consciousness of the shallowness of a nature which could conceive such a thing dawned on her? She remembered there had been no allusion in the morning to the cruel words and cold neglect of the past weeks. Perhaps it were better so; yet she would have begged forgiveness in tears and humiliation.

She recalled the remark once made by a friend. "You will love more than you will be loved, on account of the boundless love within your own personality. It will be a torture unless met with response; then, it will become a peace that passeth understanding; but only a choice soul can fully respond."

Simultaneously with this remembrance another idea darted through her understanding; or rather into the labyrinth of misunderstanding. She quickly arose and went to Robert, putting her hand affectionately on his shoulder, and meeting his look of inquiry with one of great earnestness and sincerity.

"These are beautiful, very beautiful," she said, holding up the gems, "but can you afford them?"

"Of course I can, Esther. Why do you ask?"

Esther could not answer for a moment, and her color deepened. It was impossible to give the reasons which

had led the way to this inquiry. One brief thought flashed across her mental vision—that extravagance for her might be a source of financial worry. She had heard of such things; and, oh! she hoped it might be; how easily the doubts could then be dispelled. Her husband's surprise and ready affirmation contradicted the idea, but she answered, "Because it is a costly jewel. I do not want such things if they give you a bit of anxiety over finances."

"You must remember you are no longer the simple country maid," Robert answered, stroking her hand.

When had he been so tender? Did the reminiscences of those idyllic days touch him as they had so often moved her of late?

"Nothing could be more charming than yourself in the milkmaid rôle," he went on, with a reflective tone in the slowly spoken words, "but you must have the proper situations to have it a success. It would lose all effect in fashionable New York society."

"Sometimes I wish we had the old days again for a little while," Esther said wistfully.

"Do you not like your present life?" Robert inquired, with a fine air of indifference to any previous unpleasantness on his part. "I said you do not appreciate your sudden popularity as a girl should," he smiled, "because you have so easily won it; others strive years for it. You surely enjoy the brilliant company, and all the fine houses to which you are invited?"

"Yes, I enjoy them all. But, Robert," and she bent her head to look into his eyes. If she could only let him have a glimpse into a sacred corner of her heart, and learn how much more she cared for his confidence and trust and love; that when affairs vexed him, if he would not meet her with rebuffs, when she was ready to sym-

pathize. He saw the emotion and was startled at its intensity. The expression of contempt which Esther had silently endured so many times for an instant replaced the softened one. She did not finish the sentence, while Robert controlled the harsh reply which flew to his lips, and said lightly: "You outshine any gem, Esther, but I like to see you wear them. Now sit down a moment on this low ottoman and let me tell you. I might not be able to make such a purchase as this every week," he deliberately stated, "perhaps not every month; but when I can I will; and you will have so much capital, as the receipted bills are in your own name. I have never told you many particulars in money affairs, perhaps not as many as I ought," he added in an absent tone. "As you know, my father left me a good legacy," naming a larger sum than Esther supposed. Still, with her acquired insight into the expenses of New York life, especially the life they were living, she could easily know that the income would not support it.

"Two-thirds of this amount," Robert went on carelessly, "is well invested, and is not easily withdrawn from its security. I have put that beyond the possibility of temptation, even for diamonds for you," he laughed. "With the remaining one-third I try my luck; sometimes here, sometimes there. So far fortune has smiled on the ventures, and as long as it does, we can live as we wish and occasionally indulge in whims of fancy. Will the Parkmans attend the Harleston reception?" he abruptly inquired.

"Certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, they belong to the old-fashioned New Yorkers; more sedate home-bodies than the new frivolous habits."

"I like them all the better for that, Robert; they are

so substantial; one feels so safe and comfortable with that class. But the Harlestons are not frivolous; on the contrary they are very select."

"Yes, I know. Well, put the trinket away and we will have luncheon. It is getting late, and I very much wish to run down to see Dick for an hour or two, and return in season for dinner."

But Richard came to them instead.

"I have found a fine opening for you, Robert," he said with much animation. "It does not require too great an investment, and you will get fair returns. It will need your presence through the day, of course, which will necessitate a practice of Uncle Eben's rule, about early to bed and early to rise," he added with a significant look at Robert. "Will you go down with me and look it over?"

"Yes, I will go to please you, Dick; but I have just been telling Esther I should be a stupendous failure at that thing."

"Not if you will encourage an inclination to like it, Robert. We must go right off, as I am needed elsewhere."

CHAPTER XII.

It was late in the season for a fashionable reception, but Mrs. Harleston delighted in originality, and those who knew the reasons therefor predicted its success. Mrs. Harleston was comparatively a new addition to the set in which she then moved, as she had been some years in accomplishing her entrance into its charmed circle. Mr. Harleston had wealth, which was constantly adding desirable numbers to its amount, and Mrs. Harleston knew that sooner or later it would prove to be the magic key to unlock society's doors. She was the happy possessor of a persistent character united with an abundance of common sense. While she was waiting for recognition, she was preparing herself to do honor to the station she would occupy.

Her entertainments were pronounced delightful, and those privileged to enjoy them were in a pleasant flutter of expectancy when the evening announced on the cards had arrived. There was no crush, neither was there vulgar ostentation nor tawdry imitation; no tearing of lace or inward flashes of temper. As one stood on a landing of the stairway, the spacious rooms gave vistas of rare brilliancy, thronged, not crowded, with men of dignified presence, wearing an air of prosperity; while the women of fashion and beauty were alike charming in manner and repartee. Occasionally there was a dress of

audacity or an inharmonious note, but they were easily lost in the bright chatter or shifting views of color.

Robert and Esther were a little late. Unacknowledged to any one, Robert had a secret wish to enjoy the flutter of fans and sudden attention, which had recently accompanied Esther's arrival to similar gatherings. The soft notes of the orchestra, the merry laughter and random wit, transported her into an enchanted land, where there could never be a pain or tear. She was young, admired, loved and beautiful, and the threatening clouds of the past few weeks had all disappeared. Her queenly bearing and proud delight were softened with sweet smiles of welcome to friends both old and new. She wore a graciousness all her own, born in a heart which no splendor and fashion could stifle, however much she might enjoy them. Her gown of pearl-white silk, with rare laces, was merely a setting for her animated personality; and the diamonds on the corsage had rivals in the sparkling eyes.

At a few, very few, entertainments given by special friends, Esther had sung at their request. It was considered unique. She could not be approached with pecuniary offers as if she were a professional drawing-room musician; neither could the favor be asked by others than the most interested and intimate friends. She ever received sincere and enthusiastic admiration. Her voice of unusual compass had always quickly responded to good instruction, and it was rich and expressive; besides, she sang from the heart. When after awhile it was whispered among the guests that she was to favor them, in accordance with Mrs. Parkman's wishes, who had kindly carried out an expression made to her by the hostess, there was a murmur of undisguised anticipation. As she quietly took her place by the piano, and a well-known

pianist struck the chords of an accompaniment, conversation became subdued. First, the words came softly rippling from the overflow of feeling in herself; they were followed by a burst of gladness which sent a thrill of joy to the soul of every listener, breathing as they did so much of love in life, only to end in the passion and pathos of grief.

As Esther was turning away at the close of the song, a request was made that she would sing "The Lost Chord." She had sung the wondrous melody on one occasion with great effect, but on this night she hesitated. Without perfect sympathy in its rendering it would be a grotesque failure, and to-night the world was again bright. Then, she remembered reading a story in which one of the characters said, that Mendelssohn did not write his Wedding March for any one wedding; that it was all the marriage joy of the world he put into his music, far more beautiful than the union of any one bride with her lover. Not only might there come a lost harmony into her own life, but the song was a cry from the longings of humanity.

Thrilling with the inspiration of a brave, sweet spirit of renunciation, with the pathos of suffering, and the tender sadness of a contrite heart, the notes came from a passion and emotion which alone could give such exquisite interpretation of words:

*"Seated one day at the organ,
I was weary and ill at ease,
And my fingers wandered idly
Over the ivory keys;
I know not what I was playing,
Or what I was dreaming then,
But I struck one chord of music,
Like the sound of a great A-men.*

*"It flooded the crimson twilight,
Like the close of an angel's psalm,
And it lay on my fevered spirit,
With a touch of infinite calm.
It quieted pain and sorrow,
Like love overcoming strife;
It seemed the harmonious echo
From the discordant life.
It linked all perplexing meanings
Into one perfect peace,
And trembled away into silence,
As if it were loth to cease.*

*"I have sought, but I seek it vainly,
That one lost chord divine,
Which came from the soul of the organ,
And entered into mine.
It may be that Death's bright angel
Will speak in that chord again;
It may be only in Heaven
I shall hear the grand Amen!"*

When the last words died away it was like one suppressed sob throughout the spacious rooms for something forever lost. A moment there was silence; then the feeling was relieved by hearty applause.

Esther quickly passed out of the crowd and sought a quiet nook near the door leading to the main entrance hall. To her surprise she met Dr. Parkman. His countenance always wore a glow of vivacity indicative of a sprightly, humorous nature; but with it was mingled an intensity of life which conveyed the impression that he would prefer the witty things of existence, if the more serious ones were not continually crowding them out.

Both of these characteristics were highly in evidence as he watched Esther approaching. A bright gladness was overshadowed with deep pain.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Mrs. Leighton," he said with charming deference, accepting Esther's proffered hand. "Your art is all the greater because you created it out of the brightness of your own experience."

"I did not hope to produce such a deep impression," was the simple reply, "especially as everything and everybody are so joyous and beautiful this evening."

"Perhaps I can explain away those elements as hindrances to deep emotion. You must remember the physician occupies the unenviable position of living in two worlds—the one of reality and the one of appearances. He must necessarily hear many of the throbbings in the under-current of lives, the throb of pain and disappointment and despair, as well as those of joy; they lend a pathos to life which is often hard to reconcile with the object of life itself."

"There can be few dark shadows here," Esther continued with one of her sweet, frank smiles, incredulously looking over the animated group.

"I must prove my assertion, however, in regard to the effect of your song," Dr. Parkman laughed brightly. "I need not say you rendered it marvelously well; the result showed your power to touch the hidden springs of feeling; but the feeling was there. A certain manipulator in Wall Street may have no conscience over the desolation he has caused in everyday business; a lobbyist may think only of the attainment of his own selfish ends in the daily intercourse with his fellowmen; yet, concealed somewhere in their seared souls, remains a regret for lost character, abandoned worthy aspirations, or stifled generous impulses, which is occasionally touched; and I

happen to know more than one in this assembly wearing society's smiles, who will end the night in tears from pain or grief. There is one heart," the words were tremulously low, "which will never find its lost chord, the harmony of its life."

Esther was prevented from replying by Robert joining them.

"How are you, Doctor?" he said briskly. "People are unusually social. I have been unable to look you up before."

"I have been here only a few moments; I thought I would drop in for an hour or so."

"I have had only a word with Mrs. Parkman and Ethel as yet," Esther spoke gayly. "I had an idea when I came I should be obliged to keep well in their wake, or be rather weary of loneliness."

"I have just left them," Robert continued with a careless air. "Esther, I am obliged to leave you in their care. I have been looking for the Doctor to ask the favor of sending you home at the proper time," he nervously laughed.

"What has happened?" Esther asked anxiously.

"Nothing alarming; only I must take the late train for Philadelphia."

"Must you go to-night?" Esther questioned with a troubled glance.

"*Must* expresses it, Esther. The message was sent from the hotel immediately after our arrival here. I am very sorry, but I have engaged Mrs. Dana to stay with you every night. She is a woman who kindly fills all sorts of niches at the hotel," Robert explained to Dr. Parkman. "I shall probably be away several days."

This had happened two or three times before, when Robert was not so considerate. Esther had been left

alone, ignorant of his destination, with cruel words and cutting insinuations rankling in her memory. Although the surprise came as a dark shadow on the brilliant background, she accepted the situation gracefully.

Another hour was passed in toying with refreshments and indulging in light conversation, then Esther determined to find Dr. Parkman and ask his assistance in regard to her carriage.

She had paused to look at a book of engravings, when her name mentioned in a low tone attracted her attention. A mass of palms screened her from the speaker.

"No, I do not know Mrs. Leighton," a man was saying. "I came in late, after she was through singing. I was very much in hopes to see and hear her. She is highly bred, naturally, and noble in character. She cannot know about the other wife."

"Are you sure there is another one?" a woman asked.

"Positive about it; or there was one. Her name was Mary Tyler. I have never heard of a divorce, yet it seems incredible that even Robert Leighton should do such a daring thing as that."

"Is he so very bad?"

"Wholly unprincipled. The most daring gamester imaginable; a born gambler; he generally wins, too; they live in fine style at the Fifth Avenue," and after a few more disclosures the two friends passed on.

Esther's first impulse was to challenge the strangers then and there, and compel them to acknowledge the falsehood of the cruel words which were breaking her heart. But as she waited a moment to recover from the dreadful numbness creeping over her, Dr. Parkman caught sight of her white face, and he hastened to her side.

"You are ill, Mrs. Leighton," he said, hurriedly, "but

do not faint. Please take my arm. Control yourself," he urged.

Esther looked up at him with a pain in her eyes like that of an animal wounded to the death that cannot tell its hurt.

She was soon seated in an arm chair by the door, while one attendant had been dispatched for wine and another for Mrs. Parkman.

"Shall I send a message to overtake Mr. Leighton?" Dr. Parkman asked.

"Oh, no, no," Esther replied in a frightened tone. "I am better now. Let me have the carriage immediately."

"You are quite ill," Mrs. Parkman exclaimed, alarmed, when she came in response to the Doctor's call.

"No, I am not ill. I was never ill in my life. I do not quite understand how I lost control of myself, only I felt so very faint."

"We will ride home with her," Dr. Parkman asserted with quiet authority. "She needs a little attention, and it is best to know that Mrs. Dana is on duty. The carriage is ordered."

"I think I can go to the dressing-room, now," Esther said, "but, Mrs. Parkman, I fear I shall have to ask you to say the good-nights for me."

Very few knew that anything unpleasant had occurred, and they thought nothing strange of a momentary faintness in heated rooms, so that Esther and her friends were able to leave unobserved. When the hotel was reached they found Robert's card having a Philadelphia address hastily scribbled in pencil.

"Shall I send a message?" Dr. Parkman again inquired of Esther in a low tone, and the question received the same negative reply.

When he called at daybreak, Esther had just fallen

into a quiet sleep, the sleep of exhaustion. She was too young and vigorous to lose her freshness in one night's vigil, yet there was a piteous look in the face in her troubled dreams. When she awoke, however, she declared she felt as strong as ever, concealing her pain in lively chat with Mrs. Dana, as if nothing had been amiss. Mrs. Dana was too keen and sympathetic not to perceive the feverish excitement through it all, but being a woman of shrewd sense and refined instincts, and withal one whose tongue was not given to gossip, she did not weary Esther with questions or advice. Soon after the morning meal she left her alone, promising to run in occasionally to learn of her progress.

For an hour Esther sat, half reclining on a couch, almost as motionless as a statue; then she dispatched a messenger to Richard Benson.

When Richard came promptly at the summons, Esther's courage began to fail. Was it a delusion, after all? Could she confide even in this friend? Would it not be a wrong to her husband not to wait and learn the truth from himself?

Richard saw the marks of suffering in the bowed face.

"What is the matter, Esther?" he exclaimed with a great fear in his heart. "Where is Robert?"

"In Philadelphia," she replied, struggling to be calm. "My good friend, our friend," she began, going to meet him with outstretched hands, but there was an uncontrollable quivering of the lips, one glance of despair, and she turned away to burst into tears.

Richard knew the blow had fallen. Controlling his own agitation, he said kindly: "Sit down, Esther," leading her to a seat. "And let me know what grieves you, and we will see what can be done."

Esther hesitated. It was like putting an accusation in

words, when the accused was not present to defend himself, this question she must ask; yet it seemed simply impossible to endure the suspense another hour; beyond her power to endure it alone. A great loneliness crept over her; a longing for sympathy which would not be quelled; a desperation to face the fact that she might begin to bear it; for underneath every determined thought of justice, of the confidence to which she was resolved to cling, there ran an undercurrent of accepted misery, as yet vague and uncertain, but none the less present. She was about to form the words, the reply to which she so much dreaded, when Richard interposed.

"Perhaps you will better understand," he said, "it may make it easier for you if I make a short confession myself. You are aware that I have always been Robert's friend; that I have regarded him as a younger brother. More than once when he disappointed me, I tried to rid myself of him, but could not. His father was very kind to me, a real benefactor. I can give no reason for this. I simply state the fact. You have seen my interest in all Robert does. But you do not know how my judgment and conscience were at war; that I used all my persuasive powers to influence Robert not to attempt to win your affection. I begged, entreated, threatened, without avail."

As Esther silently listened to the strange words her face grew grave and stern; there was no hope, and revenge was stirring within her. The lips moved, but not even a husky sound could come from them, and Richard went on.

"Then I watched you. I could not politely warn you against an idea you might never entertain. You were young and inexperienced, but you were very diplomatic. You concealed your heart till the evening of Aunt Nancy's birthday party. When you and Robert sang I

suspected unwritten words between the lines. Do you remember my hasty departure the next morning from Eaton?"

"Yes," Esther breathed almost inaudibly; "and I am not Robert's legal wife?"

The words came involuntarily; they would no longer be restrained. There was a keen pain at the first outburst, followed by a sense of great relief.

"Yes, Esther, you are Robert's legal wife, and God help you," Richard replied, slowly.

"Then why did they say such things?" Esther fiercely demanded, rising as if impelled to action.

"Sit down again, Esther," Richard said with command in the tone. "Who has been talking to you? Who told you that?"

"I overheard two ladies speaking about it at Mrs. Harleston's reception last evening. They were from Providence. I heard them say that it was not generally known about me," Esther went on, hesitatingly, "and they said some very beautiful things about me, which they had heard; they had never seen me. I remembered noticing how late they arrived, after I was through with the music; and they little thought I was so near them. The girl's name, the girl he first married, they gave as 'Mary Tyler,' and they were sure she is living in this city."

Richard realized that any further attempt to shield Esther from a full knowledge of events was useless.

"Esther," he said, "you are young to have a great sorrow, perhaps a life-long trouble, come into your life, but you will bear it bravely; after a time you will find something to live for. Cling fast to that thought while I tell you the story. Has Robert ever spoken much about his own family?"

"Very little. He threw out the inference that they were sometimes unjust to him."

"He is the son of one of New England's wealthiest and most influential families," Richard continued. "He was always a wayward boy, notwithstanding all the advantages and influences for good which wealth, position and Christian parents could give him. A brother and sister died in infancy, leaving him as the only child upon whom the father and mother placed so much hope; but they early learned their hope and pride in him had no sure foundation. At twenty, while still in college, he secretly married this Mary Tyler, who was several years his senior. She was a very ordinary girl, much beneath him in the social position occupied by his family. When they learned of the marriage they would not recognize her. The union necessarily proved an unhappy one, and after a few years, Robert suddenly disappeared from his home, deserting his wife and little boy, two years of age, with no support. He was next heard of in Europe. Although his father would not receive them, he had allowed Robert a generous yearly sum, hoping he might redeem himself. Robert remained in Europe two years, thinking his wife might obtain a divorce. His mother died soon after Robert went away. She was in delicate health, and her son's dissipated life worried her and hastened the end. Mr. Leighton lived but a short time. A severe attack of pneumonia caused his death after two days of illness. Did you know these circumstances, Esther?" Richard inquired.

"I only knew they both died within a short time of each other," was the answer. "I supposed Robert was with them. Tell me all," Esther begged with an air of sad resignation. "You are the only person on earth who can say these things to me; the only one in whom I can

confide. I already know the worst. I know it is true; the whole of it is true. And Robert knew nothing of their death till he returned?"

"Yes, I succeeded after a time in locating him. I think he wrote me himself. After that I kept sight of him all the while he was abroad. I had been the means of keeping him out of many unpleasant situations. At such times, after the first temptation was over, his gratitude would express itself so amiably in one of his genial moods—he has them, you know, Esther—and he would declare his repentance and my kindness so emphatically that I could only take courage and go on trying to make a man of him.

"When he finally returned home, he went off on a New England trip. There was no premeditation in his selection of places; he merely wished for pleasure and forgetfulness. After meeting you in Eaton, he wrote for me to follow him. I have already told you how I begged him to return with me immediately, and that while I was studying you the mischief was done. That is my one regret, Esther, that I did not throw away all scruples as a premature meddler, and speak to you. Would you have listened to me?"

"Do not vex yourself with one reproach, Richard," Esther said, eagerly. "From the day he first came to my studio I loved Robert Leighton—I thought I loved him. I loved the one whom I believed him to be. When you first came, if you had said to me what you have said to-day, I know what I should have done. Later, I should have placed his promises to me above all else. Girls' hearts are so wayward and rebellious." She was thinking of Hiram Foss and Uncle Eben. "It seems there is only misery in any way, either from disappointment or experience," she ended, half dreamily. She shuddered

at her own innocence and ignorance. "And after you left Eaton?" she inquired.

"I came here to persuade Mary Leighton to give up the divorce proceedings begun some time before this. In either case, Mr. Leighton's will prevented her or her child from ever inheriting one dollar of the property. I did my best," Richard modestly asserted, "to influence him otherwise. I was in his confidence and realized how deeply he felt his trouble, but on this point he was immovable. He always held the opinion that Mary Tyler, being so much older than Robert, was wholly to blame for the affair. Mary knew this, and she also knew that Robert would never support her; that nothing would be lost by the legal separation and peace of mind might be gained. Hitherto, the problem that Robert would involve another in trouble had not occurred to me; and, although I believed what he declared in regard to you, I resolved he never should have the opportunity; I would lay the whole case before Mary and appeal to her to prevent it. I was too late. The divorce had been granted quietly in another state. Both were legally free. I never intended you should be harmed, Esther. When it was all over beyond recall, and Robert came with you, and promised so faithfully he would give up his old life and be kind and true, I hoped it might be a turning point in his mad career. We have been disappointed, Esther, grievously disappointed."

"How was the property left?" Esther inquired in response to a new thought.

"The bulk of it was left in trust to Robert——"

"In trust?" Esther interrupted in surprise. "Robert gave me to understand its investment was his own forethought."

"Yes, in trust," Richard answered, wondering if

Esther knew all. "It was left in trust, with certain conditions. In his marriage with you, a girl after Solomon's pattern," he smiled faintly, "one of the conditions has been fulfilled, and you and your heirs will hold the whole of it."

"Why did Robert's father leave his money in this way?" Esther asked, looking critically at Richard, as if to compel him to confirm her fears. "He knew Robert could give his—Mary Leighton the benefits of the income if he wished."

Richard hesitated. "He knew Robert would not wish to do this," he said evasively.

"The rest is also true," Esther repeated in monotone, as if to herself. "They said it was true last night, and I nearly fainted at the revelation of it all. They said he was a gambler, 'a dashing gamester,' those were the words; the proprietor of a gaming house in this city; that there were not only those who could ill afford it, but those in social and commercial circles who could not, if they would, forget the dashing player who carried away their dollars. Richard, I have answered my own question."

Richard watched the downcast face and was silent.

"That is why he would never clearly explain the business for which he has an office," Esther went on in the same low monotone. "The office is only a blind." The words were so faint Richard only caught a part of them. She was oblivious of his presence. "He is cruel, unprincipled, an unworthy son, a heartless father—a gambler—and—my husband."

CHAPTER XIII.

To Esther had been given a soul which dies a hard death. Its strong vitality so tenacious of life, so vivid with hope, so robust in its assimilation of another nourishment if one were denied, must receive blow after blow before it crouches in the dust—dead. Yet, after each partial victory must follow the sense of something forever lost; it must stand maimed, shorn of freshness and beauty. For the moment life had changed from a world of bloom to an arid waste of desolation. The flowers of confidence, faith, love, so intense in their colorings, were nowhere visible; a deadly miasma had swept them away. But Esther could never live in this cheerless plain, where there was not a vestige of living green to sustain life; with all the roses seared and withered. She must recreate them. Already the superb health of her innate enthusiasm was struggling for breath out of the darkness of the bitter waters in which it had swooned. But like many another she must grope her way. Religious training began to war with new belief.

"Do you believe in a God?" she suddenly asked Dr. Parkman the evening after her interview with Richard, as he sat talking over the news of the day, when the professional call was ended.

Dr. Parkman was not surprised at the question. His quick eye and keen judgment had told him that Esther's sudden illness came from some great shock, not from

physical ailment. She was asking the question which thousands had asked before—"Why has this come to me?"

"I believe in a power we call God," was the reply. "Every one's conception of a Deity is not the same, but everything proves that the universe must be the manifestation of a Divine Power."

"And this Divine Power sends chastisement on poor human creatures out of love?" Esther questioned with a note of unbelief ringing in the words. "I remember hearing my Uncle Eben and Hiram Foss discuss this question so many times. Hiram decided he should prefer 'a leetle less love and not quite so much chastenin'."

"I am not sure I shall disagree with Hiram," Dr. Parkman smiled, "but such a thought gives human attributes to this Power which is beyond all conception. To me, the one great principle which all creeds reflect, is the real, vital spiritual growth of mankind. At all events, life must mean something," he declared. "It must make a difference what one is and does, or it would mean nothing. If trouble come, if conflict between darkness and light wage their battles within us, we must cling to this faith or life becomes a grinning skeleton to mock us. If we innocently make a mistake in our lives, if another wrong us, we must strive not to let it shadow the whole existence. It is hard to do these things; and the flush on your cheek warns against further conversation to-night," Dr. Parkman ended in a light tone. "And, now, listen to this: throw aside all speculative thoughts and unpleasant recollections—and sleep."

Esther could not know that Dr. Parkman's words were the outpouring of his own soul, but they comforted her. She could not sleep, however. She could only go over and over again the problem of her life, without yet

finding a solution. It was late when she finally fell into a light slumber, late in the morning when she awoke in response to Mrs. Dana's call.

"You wished me to speak to you," Mrs. Dana apologized.

"Yes, thank you," Esther returned. "I expect Mr. Benson. Just a roll and coffee, please."

She was scarcely through the simple meal when Richard came. As she went forward to meet him, Richard could see how the sudden trouble left its traces on the proud, handsome face, with a piteous look in the eyes.

"I cannot adjust my new life as yet," she said quickly, sitting down. "The old one is gone. I shall have to create an interest, and an enthusiasm in things myself; formerly they came to me as free as air, and life without them would be a treadmill of existence which would drive me mad. What they will be I have not had time to consider; or what—what will be my conduct in regard—to—Robert. This is the only thing at present I can cling to, that I must do no wrong to myself or others; that I must cherish the duty to improve all opportunities for my good or theirs, so that if the cloud should pass away I could feel the days had not been wasted. Life is so short. If a sirocco with its hot breath wither all the flowers in our path, we must find others. We must get all the good and brightness we can. I could never endure a dull, colorless, leaden-hued life; but, oh, it is so hard—so hard! And, Richard, Robert must not know about it yet. I must wait a little. I must see my way more clearly; yet, whenever I turn, an adamant wall rises a barrier to further progress. You will respect my wishes?"

"Certainly, Esther."

"And—a trouble—a disgrace—that is what hurts; to

have the finger of scorn pointed at you—but the trouble can be better borne if it can be concealed from the world. Do you think many know of Robert's life?"

"No, Esther, not among the people you meet; only a few of his father's old friends, who use their influence for good rather than to publish his faults."

"And has Mrs. Tyler consented to see me?" Esther hurriedly asked. "I cannot bear to have her believe I was in any way responsible for her trouble."

"She has done so at my urgent request," Richard answered. "I told her the little boy appealed to you. I thought your presence would disarm unjust suspicion. But you do not wish to go this morning?"

"Oh, yes, I must begin to act," she nervously declared. "You will show me the way?"

"Certainly. We will start immediately."

Richard left Esther at Mary Tyler's door. In answer to her ring she was ushered into a small, dingy apartment, which gave her a feeling of poverty never before experienced. In Eaton the poor class had at least the sweet air and flowers and broad green fields, luxuries in the city for only the more wealthy.

"Can I see Mrs. Tyler?" she said to the woman in waiting, and handed her card. It seemed a long time before she heard a footfall descending the stairs; she had come to fear she would not be received.

Mrs. Tyler entered the room with a determination not to bend to this proud creature who had come to her in her misery. She knew nothing of Esther's pain; her nature was too unlike to understand its keenness; she would throw about her a reserve as haughty as could be offered her. But as she raised her eyes to her guest she instinctively paused. Esther rose, and for a moment the two women, whose lives had been shaped by Robert

Leighton, looked into each other's eyes in silence; the one, not uncomely to look upon, of common fiber and uncultured grace, yet with a heart capable of suffering; the other, proud, beautiful, and possessing a sensitive nature which would shrink from touches unheeded and not understood by many another. Then Esther put out her hand as she came forward with a smile which spoke only of sadness. Mrs. Tyler could not refrain from giving her own, and as she watched the fair face and looked into the truthful eyes shining with a sweet spirit beneath their trouble, she exclaimed in a low voice: "Forgive me the wrong I have done you!"

Esther had relied too much on her strength; a trembling compelled her to sit down again.

"You will not think it a liberty, my coming to see you," she began, as Mrs. Tyler drew a chair near her. "Trouble is so hard to bear"—the sob in her voice almost choked her—"and I did not wish you to think too hardly of me—and I wanted to let you see that I never wished to wrong you—that perhaps I could help you in some way. And the child—you will let me speak of him—you will let me see him?"

"Mrs. Leighton," there was no tremor in the words. "Yes, I can call you that without a quiver—my love has turned to hate. He may not be cruel to one so beautiful," she went on half musingly. "You are not what I believed. Yes, Mrs. Leighton, you may see our boy. I will teach him to love you. Shall I bring him now?"

"If you will, please."

When Esther looked upon the bright, happy face she trembled at the resemblance to the father. One wild throb of pain darted through her heart, followed by a fear that this boy might grow to be like him, and make another life as miserable as he was making hers; better

that he die that day. As the childish eyes looked at her in open admiration, she forgot the dread in the compliment, and drew him toward her. He had a paper and pencil in his hand.

"I was writing a letter," he said. "Will you write a letter to Cecil, too?"

"That is his name," the mother said proudly. "It will be Cecil Tyler as soon as the change can be made. Mr. Benson urged it."

Esther took the paper, and, with a few strokes of the pencil, Cecil recognized himself in the little boy she drew. When a cap was put on the head and a pair of skates hung over his arm, his delight at the novelty of it all was quite demonstrative, as he quickly withdrew to a window to try his skill in copying it.

Esther admired the child, and his mother was proud of him. A few words were exchanged to this effect, yet there was little either could say; a stronger force than words was silently working in the thoughts of both. Finally, after a labored attempt at trite remarks, Mrs. Tyler suddenly turned to Esther and said: "Mrs. Leighton, when you came I had resolved I would not listen to anything you might say to me; but I will ask you this. I think my life will be short. Dr. Parkman——"

"Dr. Parkman!" Esther was started into repeating.

"Do not be alarmed. Mr. Benson advised me to see him. He does not know who I am; that is, he does not know I was ever Robert Leighton's wife."

Esther winced at the words, but remained silent.

"He—Dr. Parkman—does not know," Mrs. Tyler continued. "At first I wished to conceal the fact on my own account; afterwards, I half wished to reveal myself to humble you; but that is passed. I will not harm you. I

started to say that Dr. Parkman tells me very little when I question him; he gives me all possible encouragement; but I think I shall not live long—and this is what I want you to promise me—that if I die, that when I die, you will do something for Cecil.”

“I can promise that, Mrs. Tyler. He is a cherub, with his dark eyes and light hair and rosy cheeks. And will you accept this for him now?” Esther added, taking a bank-note from her purse.

“I will accept it from you,” was the glad reply, “but do not let him know—Robert—that you have seen me.”

“He does not know that I am aware of your existence,” Esther responded. “Trust me in everything. Promise me you will say nothing till I have spoken. I do not know when it will be.”

“I will do whatever you wish,” was Mrs. Tyler’s hearty response, and, with a few more words about Cecil, they parted.

Esther immediately saw Mrs. Bristol—she was so glad she met her that afternoon at Mrs. Parkman’s—and made arrangements for many comforts for both mother and child, which would be gladly attended to by that enthusiastic woman. When she reached home she was very weary, and half removing her wraps she sank down on the couch to wrestle with the tide of thought overwhelming her. If she were to go her way and Robert his, there would always be not only her own sorrow, but this in itself would bring deep grief to the two who had loved her so much; a grief all the harder for them to bear because self-reproach would mingle with it, and they were blameless. Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy seemed very dear to her. In their hearts and home would be a haven of rest, but she must not turn their peaceful lives into a sea of bitter waters. And then—she had placed

herself on an imaginary pedestal. Could she ignominiously descend and say to the world: "Behold my degradation"? Every atom of her strong pride quivered at the thought; yet, could she endure a living death through all the years? Was it true that rest and peace lie only in our hearts, our imaginations, and are not concrete realities? And that if we would have them we must make a home for them there? That if we cannot reach out our hand to bring them to us, we must let them create a heaven within us?

Mechanically she took a pencil and wrote in a fine hand the plain but inspiring courage of "The Psalm of Life." Underneath them followed the words: "Hold fast to the truth within myself and be guided by it. See that each day, however dark, gives some blessing in return for kind thoughts or deeds; that it enables the taking one step farther in improvement and to extract whatever of sweet it may bring." These she placed in a locket and hid in her bosom as a talisman. But as she wandered again and again over the ways, yesterday glowing with life, to-day shivering in the cold blast and sudden frost, her brain lost its cunning. Before morning came the real world had slipped from her grasp.

The secret she had so tenaciously determined to keep, until she could learn what she must do, escaped her lips but once.

"You remember I died that night," she whispered to Dr. Parkman the next morning, when the nurse stepped from the room a moment. "Where am I?"

"No, Mrs. Leighton, you did not die," was the smiling reply. "You are living, here in my sight."

"You forget," she maintained, her eyes fixed upon him—the eyes so like her own and yet so different. "It was the night you thought I nearly fainted. I was dying.

Do you not remember? Something stabbed me here in my breast. Oh, you did not know?" Then in rapid sentences she poured forth the whole story.

Dr. Parkman listened amazed, indignant, dumb. Hot words burned on his lips. For an instant a wild impulse seized him to snatch this beautiful girl in his arms and carry her away where there would always be sunshine without and within, and defy any power on earth or in heaven to thwart it. He set his teeth till the passing thought was under control, then he calmly said, humoring her fantasy: "Yes, I do remember. But there will come a resurrection some day, and you will live again, fairer and better and happier than before."

"Will I?"

"Believe it. You are young. It is only the old who die of tears. Think of this. Life will bloom again sometime, somewhere, for you, and you will be the richer for the seeming death."

"I will believe. I know you would not tell me falsely."

"Now will you take this and try to sleep?"

She drank the potion and turned away like a tired child seeking rest.

When Robert came in answer to summons, her lips were sealed, but in his presence the symptoms were so much for the worse that he was forbidden to see her. Dr. Parkman allayed any suspicion by saying it was not unusual for people to shun those near to them under similar circumstances, and it was generally understood that the illness resulted from overburdening the nervous system.

Two days passed with those watching at her side still unrecognized; then, waking from her unconsciousness, feeling as if a breath of sweet spring air were cooling her forehead, Esther returned Dr. Parkman's searching

glance with one of glád recognition. She was yet too weak to grasp the cause of her illness, but trustful in her security, she turned her head and fell into a refreshing sleep. When she again awoke, she only felt she was living in a vague, shadowy land, where sun and breeze and benedictions were enchantingly wafting her along; but with the passing of the days, each one bringing health and vigor, the past came vividly back to her; yet not as it had been; the crucial moment had been lived and whatever followed had been robbed of its first keen sting. When at last she was able to sit by the window, she seemed to herself to have been transformed into another being. She was no longer a gay and happy girl, a life of rich, exuberant pleasures beckoning her on, but a woman who had suffered and whose rough and thorny pathway was still before her.

CHAPTER XIV.

DURING the first days of convalescence, while Esther was living in a land of shadowy dreams, there were many rays of sunlight to brighten the dark places of memory. Mrs. Parkman, with her frequent visits and motherly kindness, was a balm to the wounded heart; Ethel came with her pleasant face and cheery manner, bringing the brightest bits of social life to gladden her friend; Dr. Parkman was ever solicitous and tender, while remembrances and messages from other friends were not forgotten. A daily gift of flowers with sincere regards, simply signed, "A Friend," was the source of much gratitude and wonderment. But more than all else were Robert's soft speech and caressing ways. He had no wish to see the fair face droop and pale, and a twinge of conscience stung him at the remembrance of harsh words and cold indifference.

A new hope sprang into life; the hope which is the bright chain uniting the past with the future, and which so strongly and enticingly coils its links around the reason and better judgment. Robert had broken faith with Richard; he had forgotten all promises to others, and thrown aside sacred obligations with no apparent remorse; yet, would she not be able to hold him if the promises were made to her, with the knowledge that she would help him lead a different life? She had yet to learn from experience, that a germ of good in a char-

acter can be wondrously developed, but that the germ must be there; that it must have been implanted when the character took on its own individuality, and cannot be infused from another. But the struggle and conquest added a charm to the fantasy.

Although, as her youthful vigor asserted itself daily growing in strength, and the ways of friends and her own household gradually settled into accustomed habits, there would come occasional, sudden shocks to disturb the new resolve, still her buoyant, young life was very tenacious of its power. She would not speak of these things yet; she would wait for a time when feeling in Robert might be strong; when emotion should sway the will with steady, persistent force, pointing through the mists of grosser claims to heights full of noble impulse.

Robert unconsciously added substance to the happy illusion. He no longer neglected her; for the time unkind words were strangers to her ear, and he was the first to detect the bloom of returning health in the white cheeks. "A real rosebud blush," he announced to Mrs. Parkman, "which stole in unawares last night while she slept."

Just now Robert was sincere in this mood. There were only two things which interested him more than Esther—himself and the gaming table, with its excitement and gain. Lately he had won such large sums that a desire for rest controlled him, and the success had rendered him so well pleased with himself that the good nature extended to others.

Secretly through all these days Esther had cherished one wish which ever glowed with anticipation, the longing to visit her old home in Eaton. She made the thought known one day with fear and trembling. Before her illness she had once suggested a brief visit and had met

with a reply she did not care to hear repeated. To her surprise, Robert not only acquiesced in the proposition, but urged its immediate fulfillment, while Dr. Parkman heartily advised it; and thus it came about that one delicious spring day, she was arranging her household affairs and furniture and wardrobe for a flight with the birds to the green fields and fragrant country woods.

When she was packing her gowns each one seemed to breathe from its folds a past pleasure or disappointment. There was the one she wore on the steamer, when she was sailing away into mysterious fairy lands; this one was associated with Rome, that one with a Parisian delight; then came the shimmering sea-green silk with its puffs of foam, so eloquently reminding her of the day of sorrow and loneliness, ending with gladness, followed by the pearl-white satin, a bride's fit attire, worn on the eventful evening when life stopped for awhile. Last and best beloved of all was the sheer billowy muslin, pure as her own heart, the wedding-gown. It seemed to distill a subtle charm, and she could again hear the words she trusted whispering to her responsive heart, and could once more look into those eyes which gave only love and trust in return. She folded the breadths with reverent hands, tenderly arranging the laces as if it were a shroud, enfolding a still form quietly sleeping the sleep that knows no waking. One great sob choked her at the thought it might be the shroud of her former self; that, on that summer day, with the scent of flowers and the sound of music, she had been buried; for, whatever the future might bring, it must bring it to another than the simple-hearted, confiding girl whom it then adorned. She was dead; and the woman arising from her ashes—what and who was she to be?

Esther still guarded the secret of her knowledge from

Robert. Perhaps the spell which held him enthralled in its dusty pathway had already been broken when he thought he might lose her—he was now so much more like the Robert she once knew—and she dreaded to bring the hideous things to the light. But, beside, scarcely acknowledged to herself, underlying all the hope, the faith in herself, was an indefinable dread of awaking from the flickering imagination to find herself giving one last moan for something forever lost. One wild idea flew into her thoughts—that she might never return; that she might flee from the lowering twilight of her life, either to darker shadows, or to a morning beckoning with sunny glances and smiles.

The work of refolding and arranging was finished, and the keys of the chest just turned when Robert entered.

"Do you wish me to accompany you to Eaton?" he asked Esther, taking a seat as if fatigued.

"No," she replied truthfully. She wished to be alone awhile, and Richard had made arrangements with Robert, so that she knew he would be with him the greater part of the time. "That is not at all necessary," she added, noticing a haggard look on her husband's face never seen before. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Yes, well enough. I do not understand, though, why I tire so easily of late. What have you there?"

"There is one thing I very much wish you to do, Robert," Esther replied, handing him the casket containing the diamonds presented her for the reception. "I shall never feel like wearing them again. I wish you to dispose of them."

"Why, Esther," he said, "I have heard you express your love for jewels many times. Why do you not wish to keep them?"

Esther stood with lowered eyes and flushed cheeks.

The burden of sorrow, the prayer for better things, her own help and love, trembled on her lips. She glanced up to meet Robert's eyes scrutinizingly fastened upon her, with the cold glitter of anger creeping into them which always made her shiver. A torrent of abusive words usually followed this expression and she waited; the impulse glowing with the sweetest offering of her heart was chilled and she remained silent.

Robert controlled the words which flew to his lips, and hastily rising paced the floor twice before speaking. Then he paused in front of her and said: "I do not wish to sell them, Esther."

The words had a metallic ring, against which she never struggled, and she remained passively calm.

"You are very fond of jewels, and everything brilliant," he went on, "and brilliancy becomes you. You must have some reason for this request. Will you please give it?" he asked with a suspicious, sidewise glance.

She could not say now, that it was because she believed them to have been dishonestly obtained; or that she had determined their expenses should come within their legitimate income, which would enable them to live quite luxuriously; instead, she said: "You remember I wore them the evening I was taken ill, and they have unpleasant associations."

"You will forget that feeling in regard to them after a little," Robert lightly asserted with a sigh of relief. "Naturally you do not wish to take them to Eaton, and it would be very unwise to leave them here. I will deposit them with a Trust Company until you return. Will you be ready to start to-morrow?"

"Everything is arranged at last," was the response. "Yes, I shall be ready. Time slips away so rapidly. May is already half gone."

Esther did not go to Eaton alone, however, although it was but a few hours' ride. Mrs. Dana accompanied her, remaining one night.

It was a warm afternoon when the little station was reached, the belated April showers and sunshine making merry all among the hills and valleys. It was well known throughout the hamlet that Esther had been very ill, and although quite strong again, that she was coming for a few weeks of Eaton air, and that her husband would join her later. In consequence of this many of the kind-hearted people were at the station to welcome her, and there were many more to send inquiries and congratulations.

"She hain't changed a mite," Hiram Foss announced to the company on the tavern piazza that evening, "only to grow sweeter and more beautiful than ever. No stuck up airs about Esther, but I jest tell you what! those little graces of her own she always had are polished till they shine. She goes in the top society, you know," he proudly added, "and I'll bet a dime she beats 'em all. She's just like a gleam o' brilliant sunshine, that's what she is."

The delight of Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy in having their dear girl again, more lovely and queenly and affectionate, could not be expressed in words. It was a feast to the poor souls to simply look at her; and when, after the supper was cleared away and the trunk unpacked, Esther presented them with many gifts, the tears in their voices would not let them give thanks for the love which came with them.

Outwardly, as the days passed, everything remained unchanged; but Esther looked out of other eyes now, and it all seemed so unlike. The old charm of a kaleidoscopic future with only brilliant pictures was gone; yet, the quiet love everywhere surrounding her was a cool palm

of benediction on the feverish spirit; and the immediate presence of trouble was often forgotten in the many attentions given and received, so that her enthusiastic, vigorous nature compelled her to accept the proffered joys; while the one hope grew still stronger in its ever newly created fancy.

Letters from Richard assured Esther all was well thus far; that Robert, all unconscious of their efforts, had thrown aside the wayward life for a season; while Robert's own missives were more like the lover than he had been of late.

After a time Ethel came for a week, and once more Esther's old merry laugh was heard, and her familiar, vivacious ways sent cheer to Uncle Eben's heart. Then the good people ventured to ask her to sing again in the quaint old church, as she was wont to do. Although, perhaps, they could not really appreciate the marvelous tones to which they listened, they could enjoy their sweetness, and the satisfaction of knowing it was their Esther who cheerfully gave them this pleasure. As Richard had written on the fly-leaf to Robert on their first Sabbath in Eaton, sorrow had given her voice a depth of pathos that was irresistible; but he would have also added that it was gained at a too great sacrifice.

One rare June day, Uncle Eben came in, his homely face transfigured with happiness.

"Esther," he said with repressed excitement, "you have not mentioned it, but I could see the little queen was sighing for her studio again, and I have fixed it all up in prime order. I've got the vines all tied up trim, and they're so thick there can't a speck of sun get in to bother your eyes; and the grass is cut as clean as a whistle all around; and," he whispered, "I've carried down one o' Ma's best chairs; the old easel had got kinder rickety like, and Hi

Foss has mended it slick as a pin. I had him do that some time ago ag'in time o' need. Hiram can do good work when he can get the ambition to start out on a piece. So now the old place is ready for you."

"Thank you, Uncle," Esther returned with a caress, concealing her moist eyes.

"You paint a good deal down to New York, don't you?"

"Yes, Uncle, I devote a certain portion of my time to it. I have been invited to enter my great picture, as I call it, for prize at the next exhibition."

The memory of it changed the eyes into dew-drops with sunbeams in them.

"You don't say," Aunt Nancy exclaimed, entering the room in time to catch the last remark. "I hope you'll forgive me, Esther, for scolding you about wasting your time over those dauby paints. Your fingers knew more than I did."

"There is nothing to forgive, Auntie. It was forgotten long ago."

"And," Uncle Eben said earnestly, "you must get all the fresh air and sunshine you can. Fashion life ain't jest the thing for roses. We don't want you to be a lily, like you were. You set up middlin' late o' nights, don't you?"

"Sometimes," Esther smiled.

"Wall, that's dreadful bad," and Uncle Eben shook his head in deep thought to find a remedy.

Esther could not tell him it was the awakening from her happy dreams as Robert Leighton's wife, that had made her so fair and frail; or of the hope that the dreams might yet be realized; so she answered, with a spiritual gleam of sacrifice in the words, "But I am as strong as

ever now. I shall endure the exactions better another season. Now, let us go to the studio."

Esther's time was quite fully occupied. Exquisite pieces of wild flowers found their way to her city friends, and the children of the village were remembered with what they regarded as their choicest gifts.

Thus the days passed swiftly by, and again the shadows deepened. Richard in his letters evaded speaking much of Robert; and Robert himself sent only occasional notes. "Business is pressing," he wrote, confidently, and she must be patient.

Esther well understood the tenor of it all; Robert was again yielding to his old love. The bright hope she had cherished suddenly grew dim. What reason had she to cherish the illusion she could longer influence him, when her love, her happiness, her trust, in the first months of their married life, had been so utterly futile? Neither her presence nor absence affected this passion of his soul; her clear judgment now overshadowed all imaginary suppositions. She must choose her life and resolutely adhere to the choice. What should it be? Whichever pathway beckoned, there hovered over it the grewsome shadows radiating from the one center of intense blackness—the somber revelation of the glaring weakness and cruel individuality of Robert Leighton's character.

Her fingers would press the locket in her bosom as she lay awake in the lonely nights, but the inspiration of the words hidden within grew fainter without the magnetic presence of Dr. Parkman's personality to give them life. Was there not an easier way? She could remain in her old sheltered home. Poor Esther! At the thought of it, all the pride of her nature would rise in rebellion, at

the acknowledgment to the world of her one supreme disappointment, and when the morning would come with its brightness and rosy hues of youthful vigor and belief that somehow all things must result for good, hope would sing anew its delusive song.

CHAPTER XV.

"ROBERT's pretty stiddy to meetin', ain't he?" Uncle Eben inquired one day as they were all sitting out under the trees.

"Not so much so as he ought to be," Esther replied, evasively.

"Wall, he seemed quite devoted to it here last summer," Uncle Eben persisted. "'Tends to evenin' meetin's faithful, don't he?"

"I never knew Robert to make great religious profession," was the reply. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Wall, he never made much fuss in public," Uncle Eben returned, serenely, "and that is the better way. Don't want ter have folks callin' yer a Pharisee, and shakin' the finger of scorn; but any one so gifted in prayer as Robert is ought to let his voice be heard mid-dlin' often; let his light shine."

"Gifted in prayer?" Esther questioned in amazement, with an anxious glance at Aunt Nancy. She had learned he was more gifted in oaths.

"Why, yes, Esther. I don't s'pose he ever told you about it; I don't s'pose he knows I heard him; but, Esther, it was the prayer I heard him makin' that mornin' in your studio, that led me so soon to consent to your marryin' him; him that was almost a stranger. Marster gifted it was; and so earnest and humble and penitent."

Esther's cheeks rivalled the scarlet silk with which she was working.

"No, Uncle, I never knew anything about it," was all the answer she could make.

"Wall, I'll have to talk with him about it when he comes up," Uncle Eben went on, good-naturedly. "I thought I'd have a nice little surprise for you, Esther, so I wrote him about comin'. He says he will be here to-night."

The scarlet tints suddenly disappeared, for an instant leaving a cheek of marble whiteness. Esther was recalling her own experience in attempting to persuade Robert to accompany her to church; for Esther could not shake off convictions instilled with her growth from childhood, and one duty was to attend church. She did not care to have Robert give Uncle Eben quite so emphatic a response as he had given her. Recovering herself she said with an unconscious pleading in the words: "Please, Uncle, mention nothing of the kind. It would only vex Robert; he does not like to be urged to do things; he prefers to do them when he chooses; a little resemblance to you, Uncle Eben, in that respect," she ended with a faint smile, and to change the conversation she made an excuse to return to the house.

"It seems to me, Ma," Uncle Eben said, watching the girl with affectionate eyes, "that Esther ain't real happy. Had you noticed it?"

"She ain't just the same, but it ain't expected she will be," Aunt Nancy reasoned. "She is a married woman now, and ought to be more dignified; then, she's been sick, and besides she is a society woman, you know," she ended, proudly. Aunt Nancy was not averse to having it understood they had a niece who "could go with the best of the city folks."

"Wall, that ain't it," Uncle Eben sighed. "Sometimes, when she thinks we're not lookin', a dreadful sad look comes over her face. If I thought Robert Leighton was not just the bestest to her, I'd publish his hypocrisy."

"Eben!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed, alarmed. "Bridle your tongue. Speak evil of no one."

"Wall, I'd like ter know, now!" Uncle Eben sharply retorted. "Folks are always preachin' you mustn't say anything agin the dead, and if you can't when they're alive, when be you goin' ter do it? Goin' ter miss all yer opportunities?"

"It is not so much that you must not talk about Robert Leighton," Aunt Nancy wisely returned; "it is Esther's husband you must not talk about."

"That's so, Ma. You're right. But I've been thinkin' on't consider'ble. I've kinder got it into my head that—that studio scene was sort o' got up for my special benefit. I wouldn't be a mite surprised if 'twas to take me in. Robert's a shrewd chap, I guess. If 'twas, I swallowed the pill pretty slick; only there was so little time I guess I didn't stop to taste it as I ought. I'll jest watch Esther a bit when he comes to-night."

But Uncle Eben became none the wiser. Robert naturally was under no embarrassment, and Esther was so sweet, though quiet, that he could find nothing tangible to attack.

A few days after Robert's arrival, Uncle Eben, Esther, and Aunt Nancy were out on the piazza one evening, wondering why he did not return from town with the mail.

"Here comes Hiram Foss, at any rate," Uncle Eben exclaimed. "He's been down to Boston for a restin' spell. He does get so amazin' tired, Hiram does."

"Good evenin', Hiram," he called out; "and so you're back ag'in."

"Got home last night," Hiram replied, sitting down on the steps.

"I suppose you took lots o' comfort looking at the sights?" Aunt Nancy smiled.

"Oh, yes, I did," Hiram assented. "But, massy! Some of the queerest places you ever see. I'd always had a hankerin' to look into the spirit business a little; so I went in one night to their meetin'. I was almost afraid, so I set pretty near the door. I didn't get much light. There was one man who took up considerable of the time telling how he could see a woman, and what nice things she said to him; but I didn't see any sense to't."

"I guess not," Uncle Eben spoke up positively. "Don't you be led into any sech doin's, Hiram. Besides, if 'twas true, who would want that kind o' women for company? Couldn't kiss 'em nor scold 'em, either one."

"Not a bit on't," Hiram returned, earnestly. "And what a place it was there! A good deal of good, but such a lot of bad. Kinder like Babylon, I'm thinkin'."

"I hope you didn't stray into unseemly enjoyment, Hiram," Uncle Eben said, solemnly. "I hope you didn't enter the Devil's dominions."

"Oh, as for that," Hiram laughed, "I was pretty careful not to get near the old critter himself; just skirmished a leetle around the sub-kingdoms—outlying deestricks, as 'twere. The arch gentleman has some prosperous provinces, though; considerable busy, too, he seems to be; he has ever so many workin' for him; he seems to pay fairly well for a spell; but accordin' to Scriptor they get cheated in the end. I sort o' think Eaton's the safest place in the long run, after all."

"I'm glad you've come back with that feeling, Hiram,"

Aunt Nancy put in. "Contentment is everything, and it is better not to be too frisky."

"Wall, yes, Mis' Hathaway. The old sarpent was a genuine old charmer, however; it sent the thrills all through you, just to look at his shinin' coils. As for the contentment part," Hiram went on, animatedly, "I've always ben brought up to believe in that doctrine, and have lived up to it amazin' well under the circumstances; but I went to church on Sunday down there, and the minister was not quite so strong on that subject as he ought to be. He said if everybody was contented with their lot, there never would be any progress made; that it was strivin' after somethin' you hadn't got—reaching out after somethin' more you wanted—that kept the world improvin'. I've ben tryin' a leetle to get into that spirit, but I can't make it work very well. It is pretty comfortable to sit in the shade in hot weather, and meditate and talk with your neighbors on intelligent subjects; as for what we eat and drink and wherewithal we be clothed, it ain't best to be too particular about such things."

"Possibly Mrs. Foss might think it desirable to encourage you in discontent," Aunt Nancy suggested.

"Wall, she has enough for the family," Hiram stoutly asserted. "Always lecterin' me about it. And that makes me think! I come nigh forgettin' my arrant. Esther, she has been worryin' the life out of her all day, tryin' to decide whether she shall make the back of her new dress skirt plain or gored. I wish you'd just run down with me a minute, and ease her mind, so she'll sleep to-night."

A quick, swift glance at Hiram revealed to Esther a hidden meaning beneath the careless words. Trembling,

she quickly assented, and, throwing a soft white scarf around her, they were soon on their way.

When nearly at his home, sheltered in the growing dusk, Hiram paused.

"Esther," he said kindly, as she suddenly grew pale, "do not be alarmed. We old 'uns may be simple in some ways, and our tongues too glib at times, but they can hold their peace and they will. That's why I come to you. It's Robert."

"What about him?" Esther faintly asked, fortifying herself for any new trouble to come.

"He is down in one of the tavern rooms with some fellers from Hillester. They are puttin' up the money pretty freely, and one or two of our young men are with 'em to look on, and then to be drawn into the net. They've been dreadful private about it, but I got an inklin' that set me to watchin'. Now I will end it as neat as a pin. You just go in and see about the dress, for that is all so—dreadful bother—and I'll run down there and get 'em to open the door. I will say, 'Wall, Robert, fun is all right, but you mustn't carry it too fur. These boys of ours will think you're in earnest; we old 'uns know you don't mean it, but the boys may take you in earnest.' And I'll say you are waitin' for him at our house."

"Can you make them believe it?" Esther said so earnestly that Hiram knew she had learned the truth.

"Yes, I can," Hiram confidently replied, and he did.

Robert immediately understood, and thought it better to follow Hiram's lead. Whatever money had been exchanged was returned to its right owners, and he parted from them with the advice not to think of those things again, even if only for sport.

"I suppose Hiram told you," Robert carelessly re-

marked, as he joined Esther and they turned homeward.

"Just a little nonsense to teach the boys to let such things alone," he laughed. "I never gambled in earnest in my life."

"Robert!"

The word involuntarily escaped Esther's lips. It was a cry from the heart. In its cadence of despair, were mingled an appeal for help, and a farewell to all that hope could bring. Esther's face, with its conflicting emotions, was so white as to have a glimmer of its own in the gathering dusk. As she stood so quietly as hardly to breathe, Robert read beneath the pain in the clear sweet eyes the scorn for his falsehood and the indignation at the reason for it all.

For a moment his better self struggled for expression. He could feel himself shrivel and shrink beneath her clear, penetrating gaze, longing for nothing so much as the power to fearlessly return it. A resolve that he would yet be worthy of it grew out of the wondrous beauty of the soul looking into his; but the pitiless demons, so long cherished in his heart, drove the thoughts away with a breath, and Robert was again himself.

"And so you have ferreted out the secret," he half sneered. "Are you the happier for it?"

"I did not seek it, Robert. It came as unexpected as it was unwelcome."

Robert glanced at her in surprise. "Dick cannot have betrayed me!" he exclaimed.

"No, Richard said nothing to harm you," she answered with a ring of scorn in the words. "Such a remark against his devotion ought to make you blush with shame. I heard it from strangers at a reception. It made me ill. I know your life. You have not only cruelly wounded

my love with your cold indifference and unkind words, but you have put upon me a burden of disgrace which I must carry alone to the end. Pride shall save you where it can. I will screen you here."

"But, Hiram?" Robert questioned, thinking more of himself than of others. "How much does he know?"

"I cannot tell. Nothing from me. He will protect you for my sake. But, oh, Robert!"

It was a prayer from out the depths of her soul calling to kindred depths within his, beseeching for what should have been hers without the asking; there was no response; there could be none from the void chasm to which she was pleading.

"Look here, Esther," Robert angrily replied, taking a step farther from her. "What is the use of all this? Let your Puritan notions go to the devil. Have you any reason to complain? You have the money and opportunity to see the world and be of it. Was not that what you wished? Would you have married me without the opportunity to grant those wishes?"

He watched her with cruel malice disfiguring eyes that could be pleading and sad. "Answer me that."

Esther was too painfully conscious of the revelation Robert was making of his hopelessly shallow nature to allow a ready reply. She only realized that the man she was beginning to loathe and despise was her husband. In her maidenhood she had never come in contact with a life, good or bad, which could develop the possibilities of herself. She could truthfully say:

"I do not know what you would have been without the opportunity, Robert, therefore I do not know what I should have done. But you very well understand that with a knowledge of yourself, I would never have married you. That is why you kept the knowledge from me;

why you made the promises only to break them. I trusted you, Robert," the lips quivered, "I trusted you. No one could create a doubt in my heart. I should have trusted your promises more than Heaven itself. I have awakened from my dream, that is all," she ended, with a tender accent in the husky tones.

"Be calm, Esther," Robert urged, unmoved. "I understand why you did not wish to keep the diamonds. You thought they were purchased with ill-gotten gains. Your notions are too strongly flavored with asceticism. One must earn a living if he would live well. If one plays he knows what his chances are. If he lose he ought to have thought of that and not whine. It is all a matter of what point of view he takes. It is really nothing."

"Is it nothing to wound a mother's love? Is it nothing to leave a wife and child—if you must leave them—in penury when you have enough and to spare? Is it nothing to win a young girl's heart only to break it? Is it nothing to play with an old man's faith in the piety of one who prays?"

The tremulous voice had become full and firm, but there was more of sorrow than indignation in the tones. Robert knew that nothing was concealed. He saw in Esther's clear, truthful eyes the nakedness of his soul laid bare as never before. There were no words with which to answer her. He sought refuge in the one thing he believed would touch her mercy.

"But, Esther, I loved you," he said.

She listened motionless. Then, with eyes glowing like stars, while a flash of emotion flitted across the white face, she replied: "No, you never loved me, Robert. Love is kind; it never harms the loved one; it does not give spoken blows for kisses; it does not disgrace, and it forgets self. You may have loved my beauty," she

added, with sincere ingenuousness, "but you never loved me."

How beautiful she looked in the dim light, with her dream of love reflected in the wistful, upturned eyes.

"As you will, Esther," Robert coldly replied. He had no conception of the heart and soul hunger in the proud girl before him, and consequently little sympathy with them.

"What do you propose to do?" Robert asked.

There was no reply.

"Will you gain anything by giving to another what has passed between us to-night? Let us go on, Esther. It is getting late. Your sensitive nature may have been shocked—it is unfortunate to have so much sensitiveness, but you will see you imagine many things which have no reality. Come," and he drew her arm within his. She had no power to either refuse or accept; she simply moved on as with no volition of her own.

"I suppose all women place their lovers on a pedestal," Robert went on as they walked slowly home, "and some of them tower to a height beyond all reason. When they do this they must expect to fall a few feet."

"But not to the ground, dashing themselves and others in pieces," was the quick response.

When they reached the old oak tree Esther said: "Please go in and leave me awhile."

For an hour, only the stars watched her desolation. Here, on this spot, she had stood as a bride, with the future glowing and beckoning with white, jewelled hands. How happy she was! The soft night air brought memories, airy, brilliant, jubilant, which now seemed to belong to a life in another sphere. In her loneliness she could see only darkness growing more and more fright-

ful, with its gaunt, spectral shapes ever haunting her with her misery. Not yet could she catch a glimpse of a sunlit ray of love and peace-and a full life darting through the gloom. She could only bow her fair head and let her soul find relief in sobs.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was the fiercest battle Dr. Parkman had ever been called upon to fight between principle and desire, heart and conscience.

When Robert Leighton returned to New York he remained there all through the hot days of August, turning night into day without turning day into night, always at the gaming table as if the passion waxed hotter with the weather and gained strength with his own increasing weakness. This burden added to a constitution already weakened by much dissipation though naturally robust, left the shadows of its presence in its wake.

Richard's pleadings and warnings were of no avail. Esther's missives, in which there may have been a silent resignation to the dying of all her cherished hopes expressed with subtle delicacy, contained no word of revenge or reproof, but they were powerless to awake him to reason or honor. He gained and lost, lost and gained, but ever went on with a perseverance and devotion worthy of a far better cause, as if impelled by some blind, insatiable force eager for his ruin. Money flowed into his purse, and with it came covetousness and greed for more to carry on the excitement of the play; while honor, respect of friends, consideration for the girl who bore his name, everything, were thrown aside as naught.

September brought no relief from the intense heat, with cool breezes and refreshing nights, till half the month and more had sped into the eternal Past; then,

when there came the cool scent of sea weed on the shore and life-giving air on the land, Robert Leighton found himself unable to respond to their healing influences. He realized that his strength, which hitherto had answered to any strain put upon it, would fail him after a certain amount of pressure, and that the power of endurance grew perceptibly less. He finally consulted Dr. Parkman, who, after thorough examination of heart and lungs, requested him to call again the following morning.

"I have been thinking of a winter or even a year in California," Robert remarked as he rose to leave the office. "What would you advise?"

"I will talk with you about it to-morrow," was the brief reply.

The thought which the tempter, ever ready for a victim and knowing the value of an attack when he is off his guard—the thought which he thrust into Dr. Parkman's mind was the cause of the struggle going on through the silent watches of the night.

"Robert Leighton's life will be short in this climate," said the tempter.

"Yes," replied the knowledge of medical skill.

"His life might be prolonged in a more congenial atmosphere, if he promptly took the precaution?" queried the spectral companion.

"Most certainly."

"And Esther Leighton will accompany him?"

"Undoubtedly," replied the man.

"And—you—love Esther Leighton!"

The words ringing through the consciousness like the music of silver bells, sweet, solemn, harmonious, thrilled through and through Neidhurd Parkman's whole being.

"I love her with my whole mind, body and soul," came from the heart. "I have loved her from the time I saw

her that bright, Autumn day whose sunlight has never left me, when I believed her to be a maiden still un-won. I shall always love her."

"And she does not know this?"

"No one knows it."

"Then no one could accuse you. Love has strange ways," the tempter insinuatingly explained, coming closer that he might peer into the most secret places of a soul. "It's comings and goings will never be understood till its creator and the development through ancestral ages are better defined."

"No," whispered conscience, "its coming into existence cannot always be helped. It is what you do with its existence which matters."

"It takes the heart by storm. It enters unannounced. What then?"

"Thrust it out," came the answer with a groan at the pain, and a prayer that the effort was beyond any power.

"If you cannot!"

There was a pause between the combatants. They confronted each other, with grim visages, gaining strength and skill for a final encounter.

Then came the ringing words: "Let the heart, with its divine inhabitant, ever be a secret sanctuary, hallowed with the rapture and sadness of love; but out of which shall go nothing but purity and peace, clothing the loved one with a thousand charms, ever striving to act according to the ideal inspiration; thus, you will send a spiritual gleam along your own pathway, which will lighten it and broaden it and make you worthy to walk in it."

"But—Robert must die." The tempter's voice was soft and persuasive. "What does it signify whether it be sooner or later? What is a year in a man's life? Will he be governed by your advice?"

"I think so."

"Her heart is now filled with grief. He will die. He will die here, if you will. You could soothe and calm and restore her trust in love. You might win her love. Away from you, ignorant that you love her, a rival may do all these things. What then? What is a year in a man's life?"

Neidhurd Parkman was not a perfect man. He listened to the siren voice, faint and low, and followed it afar. He saw an imaginary plain stretching out before him, beautiful, flower-laden, with happy voices, passionate and tremulous, ever in concord, as two forms wandered over it, hither and thither through the shadowy and sun-streaked vistas. Then, away beyond, close to a valley of gloom, a white, dead face peered from out the loveliness, and a voice said: "You robbed me of a year of my life."

"You believe he will die sooner or later?" the tempter questioned, cautiously.

"I believe it."

"But you may be incorrect."

"It matters not what his decision may be or the sequence of it. It is my decision in accordance with my own belief which matters."

The tempter stood silently by, watching a strong man's soul struggle for its life on a seething, tempestuous sea. The waves dashed and hissed and roared, but the breaking of each incoming swell bore its victim higher and higher on its crest, till at last the firm brow of the rock-bound cliff was reached, when with the grasp of superb force a safe landing was attained. Weary and panting he lay, he who had out-rode the gale. Another plain stretched out before him less brilliant. Fewer flowers scented the air with their exquisite fragrance. There was

a moan in the wind, and some of the ways were bleak. There was no harmonious blending of two voices in love's sweet melody. Only one form walked this plain, instead of two; a form whose breath was both glee and sadness; whose voice was a note of pathos and of thankfulness; whose pale face shone with a light which was the luminous reflection of honor won; and no white, dead face made the memory a pool of blackness.

Just as the morning stars sang the night's farewell, Neidhurd Parkman laid his head on his pillow in sweet, peaceful sleep. The tempter had fled.

"Ned! Ned!" Mrs. Parkman called at the Doctor's door. "You will be late for office hour. You have overslept."

"Indeed I have, Mother," was the cheery reply, as Dr. Parkman glanced at the French clock on the mantel. "I will be down directly."

When he was seated at the breakfast table, as Mrs. Parkman handed his coffee, the mother's watchful eye noticed a look of weariness never before seen on her son's countenance.

"You are working too hard, Ned," she said, anxiously. "You must take more rest. Did you have a critical case yesterday? An anxious one?"

"Yes, Mother. It kept me awake through the night, but I feel perfectly assured I shall find all is well this morning. Do not worry, little mother."

Dr. Parkman had but finished his breakfast when Robert Leighton was ushered in.

"I came early," Robert said at the close of another thorough examination, "as the California trip is somewhat of a puzzle. I am very well settled here for the present. I think my preference would be to remain here through the winter. I have decided to leave the pleasure

of traveling wholly out of the question. If you think my health requires it, would be better for it, I shall go. I shall abide by your judgment."

"Will Mrs. Leighton accompany you?"

"I am very sure she will."

There was a tone of masterful authority in the reply, which harshly rasped on Dr. Parkman's tender nature. The words of the silver-tongued tempter were burning in his memory, but he was strong as tempered steel.

"I advise it by all means," was the answer.

"Is there any special need for haste in the matter? You do not think it serious?" Robert inquired.

"We will hope not serious," was the evasive answer. "September is nearly ended," Dr. Parkman hurried on. "October is usually a life elixir, but I would start as soon as the first of November."

And this is how Esther, quietly sitting one afternoon on the piazza busy with muslins and laces, received a letter from Robert with the surprising news of the intended trip. It was written with no suggestion of the past. Robert merely said he was a little indisposed; the journey was solely to recuperate, but they should stop at various cities and places of interest on the way, and would she accompany him?

There was the same dominant spirit conveyed, though not written, which ever characterized Robert's decisions—that it would be better for Esther to accept rather than refuse. He had the faculty of placing all blame upon her, if there were ever any blame at all. A line from Richard in the same mail requested her to leave Eaton at noon the following day, with the promise that he would meet her at the Grand Central. These few words assured her there was something of more importance than Robert's letter indicated. She hastened to Uncle Eben and Aunt

Nancy with the news, and in spite of all protestations she insisted that preparations for her departure should begin at once.

When Esther had left the room, after an animated discussion on the part of the worthy couple over so abrupt an ending to their delightful summer, Uncle Eben said: "Ma, I received the check for the last grist of berries this mornin'. I did not tell you because I wasn't quite settled in my own mind as yit."

"Settled about what!" Aunt Nancy exclaimed. "You get unsettled amazin' easy, Eben."

"Pretty snug little sum, all in all, from the first year's crop, ain't it?" he chuckled, naming the whole amount realized from the much-discussed berry patch.

"Indeed it is, Eben, and half is yours."

"The whole on't, Nancy, if I'm a mind to take it. That's it. The day Robert went away he told me it was all mine; that he didn't want a bit of it. Esther heard him."

"Wasn't she willin'?" Aunt Nancy questioned in surprise.

"Willin'! How can you ask that, Nancy? I see it was no use to haggle over the matter. He would come out ahead the same as he did last summer in the beginnin' o' the business. That's a way Robert has," Uncle Eben reasoned. "It makes no difference whether it's big or little things, he always seems to have his own way. If his disposition run in that direction he could be a consummate tyrant."

"Wall, thank the Lord it don't," Aunt Nancy advised, "and be careful of your language, Eben. Did Esther say anything?"

"I said to her, 'Esther, what a good husband you have!' She just got up and come straight over to me and put

her arms around my neck, and her cheek on mine, and half whispered, 'Uncle Eben, isn't it beautiful for you to have it.' But there were great tears in her eyes," Uncle Eben ended, mournfully. "I didn't like those tears in her eyes."

Uncle Eben went to the door to conceal his emotion, and pretended to be looking over the well-tilled acres. They represented his devotion to them, his courage in wrestling with nature, but alas! there was little wealth in them.

"It would make some improvements," he went on, again turning to Nancy. "Fences need repairin' and some new ones, too. You might have the new fixin's in the kitchen, and a new silk gown."

"It was Richard Benson who found the ready city market for the fruit," Aunt Nancy reminded. "If we had depended on Robert half of 'em might not have been sold. Better not give him credit for too much generosity; he seems to care so little for money."

"Yes, I know. Mr. Benson is a good man. We must remember him in some way he will enjoy. But—Ma," and Uncle Eben emphasized the resolution with a sturdy blow on the table with his fist, "if I thought Robert Leighton made our little girl any trouble, if he wasn't nice to her, I wouldn't tech his money. I wouldn't tech one dum cent on't. You can't kick a man with so much gusto when you feel indebted to him."

"There, there, Eben! Keep calm. Why don't you ask Esther about it?"

"Because, Ma, I should be none the wiser if I did. Esther has a way of goin' around things sometimes without givin' any light about 'em. What she wants us ter know she'll tell without askin'."

"You really don't think Robert is bad, do you?" Aunt Nancy questioned, somewhat alarmed.

"No."

"You are in a good deal of doubt about it?"

"Yes, I am."

"Wall, then," Aunt Nancy smiled, "give him the benefit of the doubt and be thankful for the money. You have certainly come honestly by it."

"Aunt Nancy! Aunt Nancy!" Esther called from the stairs, and the discussion was postponed.

Those were busy hours that evening and the morning following. Many came to bid Esther good-by, somewhat awestruck to hear she was going so far away; to them it was almost like going to another planet. Many remembrances were left for others; arrangements made by Esther for a coming Thanksgiving cheer where there was not plenty to provide it, and little articles of her own making to be given to friends. A generous bank-note found its way into Mrs. Foss's purse, while Hiram was not forgotten.

At last everything was ready and a little group were at the station watching the train come in; then, a few last farewells and Esther was whirled out of their world into one of her own.

To her, the few hours' ride to the city were full of conjecture and mental confusion, so that when she stepped from the car it was a great relief to find Richard awaiting her.

"I wished to see you first," he explained, as they walked toward the carriage. "I thought it better. You have heard from Robert?" he inquired, when they were seated and on their way.

"Yes, just saying he was a little indisposed and had decided to take the trip away."

"Of course that was all he could say about himself. But—Esther—his days are numbered if he remains here."

Esther gave a sudden start at the words, as if incredulous.

"Are you sure this diagnosis is correct?" she asked, trembling.

"Very sure. Dr. Parkman is skilled in such matters, and he has consulted others unknown to Robert."

"And if he does not remain here?" Esther said.

"A mild, dry climate may bring about great results. At this stage of the disease it is difficult to tell just how the change may affect one. It may effect a cure. It will undoubtedly prolong his life, one year or two, at least—then the end may come."

"I do not understand it," Esther replied, in great surprise. "He seemed so well and strong."

"He is one of those who show no signs of weakness till the limit of endurance is reached," Richard explained; "when the break comes it is sudden and serious. If there is any incipient malady lurking in the system, from heredity or any other cause, it increases rapidly. In Robert's case it is a weakness of the lungs, a family taint. Shall you accompany him?" he asked after a moment's silence.

"Yes. My life again seems shaped for me by no volition of my own. There is nothing to do but accept it."

"I saw Robert this morning," Richard went on, as they were driven to the private entrance of the hotel. "We both expected you to-day, though he knew nothing of my letter. Your rooms are doubtless ready for you."

As they entered them, Mrs. Dana was just giving the finishing touches to arrangements.

"I had decided that these rooms must be exchanged for less expensive ones—if I could bring it about," Esther confided to Richard when they were alone. "At

least the expense in which I share must come from legitimate sources. Those are sufficient."

"You can accomplish that better elsewhere, perhaps. Is the painting finished?" Richard asked in response to a sudden thought as he stood at the entrance to the alcove.

"It is nearly finished."

"Can you do the remainder before you leave?"

"With steady application I think I can."

"Well, then, do so, and I will take charge of it, and see that it has its deserts in hanging at the Prize Exhibition. You must not lose the opportunity."

"How thoughtful you are, Richard," Esther replied earnestly. "That is one of the things dear to my heart which I thought would also have to be given up. You deserve all the good things life can give you; you make so many others happy. And," she added, timidly, with a faint smile, "I think I know some one whom you could make supremely happy."

They were sitting down now, and Esther meekly folded her hands in anticipation of assent or rebuke, but Richard became grave and silent.

"I did intend to say it sometime," Esther went on, gaining courage, "but not now. It slipped out unawares. I had suspected it before, but I knew it when Ethel was in Eaton last summer."

"My dear Mrs. Leighton," Richard replied, "how could your judgment lead you astray? Who would dream of Ethel Parkman harboring an affection for a bear like me; a society girl, too."

"Ethel is not what you mean by a society girl," Esther spoke up warmly in defense of her friend. "Of course, she likes society and a few pleasures; you would not care for any one who did not. She is a very domestic

little body, however, and bright and sprightly, if she is rather quiet."

"I admit all you say, Esther," Richard laughed, "but it does not follow that she has more than a friend's regard for me, even if I should wish her to have."

"I know the signs of the condition," Esther said so seriously that Richard laughed again.

"What are they?" he asked, with a light in his eye which escaped Esther's notice.

"Every time she mentioned you, she spoke your name with an unconscious tenderness that was almost reverence," Esther announced, with a conviction born of experience. "Your opinions about things were placed above every one's else; and if I gave you praise, a proud, glad light came into her eyes, which the heart never sends except for love. I have always wished this might happen to my two dear friends. Do you believe you could love her a little?"

"Perhaps."

"You would have such delightful, peaceful lives, not turbulent like mine."

"I never supposed match-making was one of your accomplishments, Esther."

"It is not. But I am going away so soon; and I did want to speak of it. And you will think of it?"

"Indeed I will," Richard responded, emphatically.

"I fear the dear girl's heart would have an ache otherwise, and I have great sympathy with that."

"I will think about it, Esther," Richard replied, with a twinkle in his eye. "But I must leave you now. Your warm-heartedness in our welfare—Miss Parkman's and mine—has for the moment made me forget your troubles. Tell Robert I shall expect to see him at my office every

day. And remember, Esther, in any and every way I can assist you I am at your command."

When Richard was gone Esther mechanically put away her wraps, and went around the rooms, giving artistic touches here and there almost unconsciously. She was thinking of the startling changes coming so rapidly into her life, without giving her time to adjust herself to the varying circumstances.

When Robert came she was busy overlooking trunks and chests to learn what needed to be made in readiness for their departure. He greeted her pleasantly, and no allusion was made to unpleasant occurrences. Esther had resolutely taken up the burden to bear to the end.

"You are willing to go, are you not?" Robert asked, after going over many particulars, including herself as a matter of course. "You do not object?"

"I am willing, Robert," she simply replied, and there was never any further consideration about the matter.

The next morning after Robert had left home, Ethel came. Esther thought she had never looked so pretty and sparkling.

"You went to Europe on your wedding journey, Esther," Ethel said, with a blush, after a hundred other subjects had been disposed of. "If it were not Europe, where should it be?"

"There are too many places to mention in a breath. Why do you ask?"

Ethel's cheeks became roses as she drew off a glove. On a certain finger a diamond glittered in its golden circlet.

"Oh, Ethel!" Esther exclaimed, in despair over her schemes of the previous evening. "I hoped it might sometime be Richard!"

"And it is Richard!" Ethel responded, in the prettiest

way imaginable. "After you went away there was only one house for him to visit."

"You sly little puss," Esther said, with so much feeling as to make the words almost sad, giving Ethel a hearty kiss of congratulation. "You have won a prize. And what a rogue Richard was. I saw him last night and he never mentioned it. And you never wrote me a word!"

"It only happened two weeks ago," Ethel apologized, "and we wanted to keep the dear little secret to ourselves awhile."

"When is it to be?"

"It was to be in November," Ethel said, modestly, "but now it is to be in October, all on account of your sudden going away. We must have you and Robert to enjoy it with us. And we are going to Montreal."

"Of course your home will be in the city?" Esther said, "or will you try the suburbs?"

"We shall live at my own home. Neither mamma nor Ned will listen to a word otherwise. They say their voices would echo in the great empty house."

"My dear girl!" Esther said, with a tremor in the words. "How happy you are and will be! I am so glad!"

"And we are so sorry to have you leave us, just as Richard and I would enjoy you more than ever. But I suppose it is best. Richard thinks so."

Esther smiled at Ethel's innocent way of giving Richard's opinion preference to her brother's, but she only replied: "I am sure it is."

Then Robert returned and Ethel was kept to luncheon, and afterwards Robert was told the surprising news.

Robert seemed so active and well that Esther, notwithstanding her confidence in Dr. Parkman, secretly felt as-

sured that the change of climate would restore perfect health. After he had hurried away to go down to Richard's office and Ethel had gone, this impression gained strength, as she recalled his naturally strong recuperative powers. It was easier to leave her friends and the many advantages of a New York winter when the need for doing so was so urgent. Besides, one bit of life's experience so deeply grieved the heart and wounded the pride that she became more easily reconciled to these things. The knowledge of Robert's character and life had become more generally known, and there were some who politely shunned her. They could not welcome the proprietor of gambling rooms to their homes, however slyly the business might be conducted, and necessarily his wife could not be invited alone. Esther recalled Tennyson's line: "As the husband is, the wife is."

She resolved that if Robert lost social prestige and respect, she would, if possible, fit herself to be worthy of them, whether the opportunity were granted or not. There were her painting and music and reading—and herself, to be improved. If there were to be no love in her life—and for a love that would respond to what her own might be, though now crushed and stunted in its growth, she would have given all else—if this were denied, bruised and broken-hearted—she must have some enthusiasm for which to live. But, oh, it was so hard! So hard to keep a firm footing in the craggy ascent, with no hand outstretched to help. And the man who would have shielded her in the hollow of his hand, whose love would have enshrouded her so strongly and tenderly that no harm could have reached her, stood by helpless and silent.

CHAPTER XVII.

It was a bright, crisp day near the end of October when Richard and Ethel were married. Only a few friends were allowed to share the pleasures with the family; the social obligations to others and to Dr. Parkman's circle of acquaintances were fulfilled in sending cards for a reception on their return.

The great charm of it all for Esther lay in the calm, peaceful, restful love and confidence between Richard and Ethel, giving assurance that no tumultuous life would be theirs, but one of deepest trust and repose.

When it was all over and the last good-bys had been said, Esther's whole attention was given to the preparations for her own departure, as she and Robert were to leave New York the following day.

The picture was finished and already hanging in Mrs. Parkman's parlor, where it was to remain till the opening of the Exhibition. Esther's instructor had requested her to allow it to be presented at the regular Exhibition later, with a price put upon it.

"But I do not wish to sell it," Esther said. "I wish to keep it myself."

"Then have your price so high none will wish to pay it," was the reply. "I wish very much to have it exhibited."

To this Esther readily consented, and all the arrangements were intrusted to Richard.

The landscape depicted was beautiful in its sunset glory, with its richly tinted clouds, and a soft, evanescent mist on the hills, while there were cool, sweet depths of blue overhead. But all this beauty was overshadowed by the two figures standing out in bold relief, creating a feeling in the spectator that he had inadvertently entered a sacred, secret place. The youth was strong and agile of limb, while on his bright, handsome face, full of character and repose, shone joy, expectation, certainty. Esther had given him life from the Robert of her imagination, the Robert whom she had believed him to be. Near him, so close the folds of the muslin gown just fluttering in the light breeze almost touched him, stood a maiden, lightly poised as if ready to take wing. Every line was a graceful curve, rendering the figure airy, hesitating, tremulous; while the eyes, looking far beyond into unseen distances, were luminous with a love so strong as to overshadow the fear lurking within their depths. The face was fair, with a rose tint on cheek and lip, and was glorified with an unspeakable beauty and charm. The youth could well await the answer he knew would be his, enveloped in such a glow of soul. Below were the lines:

*"Standing with reluctant feet,
Where the brook and river meet."*

Esther had put so much of herself into the whole of it, the lights and shadows all spoke so eloquently to her, that she almost felt as if the gods of the sunlight and leaf, of mountain and dale, would come at her call; and that the indwelling God within the souls of her creation could respond to that within herself.

She reluctantly parted with the picture. She said something to this effect at the moment of leaving.

"There are many farewells just now," Dr. Parkman replied. And, as for an instant he held her ungloved hand at the last good-by, a prophetic inspiration told him the only woman he ever loved was going out of his life beyond his power to recall, and he could make no sign.

It was December when Robert and Esther were finally settled in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. The change of air and scene, and particularly his strict adherence to Dr. Parkman's advice in regard to much sleep and little excitement, had seemed to produce the result of usual health and activity. Esther did not seek society here, but society sought her. She could not keep her charming personality hidden under a bushel. Although there was less spontaneous vivacity, youth would hold its sway, and before the close of the season she was the acknowledged leader in the city's life. Then, again, the sky darkened. She was prepared for it. Never for a moment had she felt secure. A grim, distorted shadow was ever at her side. A few weeks of the old life and Robert became quite ill. Suffering, instead of softening his nature, increased his unpleasant characteristics. Jealousy, and irritability and selfish exaction made Esther's life a burden.

With the return of spring they repaired to a delightful spot a few miles from San José, quiet, isolated and quaint. The air was a healing balm. Life was faintly colored here, but a few circumstances occurred which left an indelible impression of the place on Esther's memory. It was here she received the exhilarating message that her picture had won the prize. When the word came she impatiently awaited Robert's return at night. Her own glad enthusiasm believed it would dispel some of the gloom hanging over him the last few days. She did not

realize that this was caused by his impatience at the restraint placed upon him in this quiet place, and also by his growing hatred of her superiority. He could not bring her to his level; and so far she had been able to maintain her dignified, refined ladyhood in replying to his unjust thrusts.

When Robert returned, Esther went to meet him with the letter in her hand and the old, proud, glad light in the wistful eyes, radiant in her success.

"Robert," she exclaimed, exultingly, "I have won the prize! Not only that, but great praise for the conscientious technical work, and—and," she went on, blushing, "they said it was more than talent; that it was genius."

Robert returned her ardor with a cold stare of insolence.

"I don't care a damn about your nonsense," was his reply, as he passed on into another room.

A few drops of the icy mist, rising from the chilling atmosphere, fell on Esther's heart and froze it. When later she received the surprising news that the picture had readily sold at her own price, and that Dr. Parkman had succeeded in repurchasing it at an advance of two hundred dollars, she kept the news to herself.

"The picture is yours," Richard wrote, "if you wish it. Dr. Parkman purchased it for you, but if you are willing to part with it, he is only too glad to secure it at the price given, and more if need be."

The painting remained in Dr. Parkman's home and is still in existence.

Here in this quiet nook an incident happened which gave Esther great pleasure. There was a small church near them which she would often attend Sabbath morn-

ings. The people were not her people of New England, yet they reminded her of the little home place, and she enjoyed their sincerity and single-minded views. Just before the service one Sabbath she overheard great disappointment expressed over the prolonged absence of the soprano, a pretty young girl with a sweet voice. She quietly offered her services if they wished. The good people had never listened to music like hers. Their profuse thanks were accompanied by an offer of pecuniary reward, which to them was large.

"No," Esther replied, "I will not sing the few weeks I may be here for money, but if you wish I will gladly sing for you." She felt herself to be the debtor, for here, untrammelled, she could relieve her heart in song.

One morning about mid-summer, Robert came in and announced his intention of going to the Nevada mountains—in fact, all the arrangements for their sojourn there were completed.

"I have purchased a cottage," he said. "The owner has been in San José a week looking for a customer. It is a wild, romantic spot, just suited to your fancy."

"Is it quite isolated?" Esther asked.

"Very much so."

"Are there no other cottages near?"

"Oh, yes, several farther down the mountain; at the base there is a small hamlet comprised of agricultural people and mountaineers."

"I cannot go, Robert," Esther said, with a great sinking of the heart at the thought of the loneliness.

"A man and his sister, Clarence and Jane Markham, are in charge of the house," Robert went on, unconcerned. "I believe they are from the East. I think their father was one of the unsuccessful adventurers of Forty-

nine. They are past middle-age, considerably past it, and have been there a year. I have engaged them to remain."

"But I cannot go, Robert."

"Oh, no. I dare say not. How supremely selfish you have grown, Esther! You have received too much praise. It has not been good for you. You were not so once. But I suppose it does not matter that I require the change?"

"You do not," for once Esther persisted, as the desolation of such a life confronted her with great vividness. "Before we came here I consulted the physicians of San Francisco, to learn whether mountain air would be more beneficial. Their reply was that it would not be more so. They said you responded very readily to the healing effect of the California climate; and as Dr. Parkman told you, sleep and no excitement were needed to supplement it; those you have here."

"Well, Esther, the arrangements are all made and I am going. I would advise you to make no fuss over it. I need you, and it would not add to your reputation to have report spread abroad that you cruelly neglected and deserted me. What if I am very well here in this beastly place? I may be better elsewhere."

Esther went without further opposition. The journey was a delightful one. The mountains were grand, the sky beautiful, the air balmy and healthful. They found the house comfortable, and the kind thoughtfulness of Clarence and Jane had everything in order to receive them.

Esther had experienced not a little anxiety in regard to the people who were to be the guardians of their new home, but when she looked at their honest faces and noted the neat, trim appearance of themselves and all the

surroundings she felt she had found friends whom she could trust.

"We are quite alone up here, are we not?" she said to Jane the next morning, as they were planning the household necessities. "Are there no cottagers, no families above us?"

"No, no cottagers, Mrs. Leighton," was Jane's reply.

"Are you not afraid sometimes?"

"No. There is no reason for being afraid."

"But are there no workmen's houses? no buildings of any kind?"

Jane hesitated. "Yes, there is one not far up."

"What is it?"

"They never trouble us, Mrs. Leighton," Jane said, confidently. "They never trouble us at all. If any one interfered in their affairs, I don't know what they would do, but no one ever does. The rich city folks come up there secretly, and I've heard there were many from other countries. It is a common looking house, and if one went there to make trouble, they would find nothing. I believe they tried it once or twice."

"But what is it, Jane?"

"Some rich Mexicans have a gambling house there, they say," Jane whispered. "They say so. I don't know."

Esther understood the reason of Robert's visit to the mountains.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was a little past mid-summer in the year 18— when Robert and Esther began their life in the mountains. At first the plan was to remain there only into the autumn months; but the time had been extended again and again, till nearly two years had passed. With the exception of the three winter months which were spent in the little hamlet in the valley, where there were some social privileges and enjoyments, their life was uneventful and monotonous. Had Robert chosen the better way, he might have had many years of pleasure and usefulness for himself and others; but he no longer heeded the many precautions given him. The last winter in the hamlet revealed to him only too strongly his weakness. It told him he had lost his grasp on the world; that he could no longer be a vital part of it; that he must yield and stand aside, as the busy, tumultuous, exacting life passed by. He understood the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong. It was this which led him to return to the mountain home in spite of Esther's pleadings and protestations. Here, the one passion of his life could be gratified; here, he could still hold his place unrivalled, for his skill had not yet failed him.

Besides, notwithstanding his convictions of himself through the winter, he believed the mountain air would eventually restore lost health; and although he gradually grew weaker, he would declare he was steadily improv-

ing; that another month would find him quite himself again.

But, deeper than all these reasons lay a thought so black, like a crawling, slimy thing, that even he would not allow himself to bring it to light. He called it by another name. He reasoned to himself that it was a righteous jealousy of Esther, a laudable protection of her from dangers of her own charms; yet he would have stricken one to the ground who dared to breathe aught against her principles or honor. His faith in her was impregnable; yet he had come to hate with a demoniac hatred her superior vantage ground. Alone, she stood on a pedestal above him. She would reach down her hand to bring him to her, but she would not descend to him. Her charming capabilities, of which he had once been so proud, tormented him, and his petty selfishness delighted in making her feel the sting of his power. No greater punishment could be inflicted than this complete isolation from all her rich nature craved.

To those outside, to her distant friends, Esther met the situation right royally. Her letters to Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy were filled with descriptive bits of scenery, which was really fine, with her various occupations, her household affairs, anything and everything to please their fond hearts, and nothing to make them grieve. To Richard and Ethel she wrote only of Robert's improvement or relapse, as the case might be, and incident and customs peculiar to the new life. Even to them she never disclosed the existence of the grim, silent house above her, which haunted her days and nights like a hideous specter ever at her side. Her proud spirit could brook no continuous pity even from those she loved.

But with herself many a battle was fought. From day to day she looked out upon the dreary oppression with

courageous eyes, but oh, how often her heart failed her! The clear, sunny heights which she had pictured as a part of her married life, where she would walk hand in hand with a loved one, had wholly disappeared, becoming only memories of a fantastic dream.

As the picture hopelessly faded, Esther tried to remember the lines she ever carried in her bosom.

"Hold fast to the truth within myself.

"See that each day, however dark the shadows, gives me some blessing for a kind thought or deed, and enables me to take one step further in my own improvement.

*"Bear through sorrow, wrong and ruth,
In thy heart the dew of youth,
On thy lips the smile of truth."*

It was no wonder she sometimes faltered by the way. Yet, she must have enthusiasm for something in order to live. Her music and painting became dearer than ever. When she found they were to remain in the mountains, she procured the means with which to carry on these studies alone, when the exacting demands of her husband would allow. Then, not wishing all exertion aside from home cares to be for herself, she thought of the children in the hamlet who were deprived of much which childhood ought to have. One afternoon of each week Clarence would carry her down into the valley, where she would meet them, teaching them many useful things as well as how to sing. One lad, who later became noted in his profession, told her his first interest and the awakening of his talent came from her instruction.

A few times Esther begged Robert to have some thought of the money he was wasting, when she knew

he was losing heavily, and she secretly wondered whence it all came.

He would reply: "Whose money is it I am spending? Is it yours? Did you earn it? Did you bring it to me? You brought me a large dowry," he laughed. "When you earn the dollars, when you furnish the money for my entertainment, then you may dictate as to how I shall use it; not before."

After this Esther made no appeal. She simply accepted the inevitable, and waited for the next scene in the drama of her life, wondering what it would be, for nothing came to her in the calm, usual way.

Robert now slowly but surely failed from day to day, but yet he clung to life with a persistency which lengthened his days.

Night after night he left Esther and his home, and, accompanied by the faithful Clarence, would slowly totter up the mountain side.

One evening he returned at a very late hour. Esther knew from his troubled mood that he had been losing heavily. In desperation she resolved he should no longer be a victim of their crafty schemes; she felt that he had lost his own skill, and was wholly at their mercy.

With nervous haste Robert ordered Clarence to again bring his coat and staff.

"Robert!" Esther begged, "will you grant me this one favor? Will you remain at home to-night?"

"No, Esther. I swear I will win back the ten thousand dollars they have taken from me. Let me alone. I swear it and I will do it," and with an oath Robert called Clarence and started on the mission.

With a white, determined face, Esther quickly prepared to follow.

"Jane," she said to the faithful woman, "I must follow

my husband. Will you accompany me? It is a dangerous journey for us alone at midnight. The mountains are the hiding places of outlaws and criminals. We must take our lives in our hands."

"I have never failed you, Mrs. Leighton," Jane replied, "and I will not fail you now. And Clarence is somewhere there. He will hear if we call. I will go with you."

"I ought not to ask you, Jane," Esther replied, with hesitation. "I will go alone."

"No, my good, kind mistress, that cannot be. I shall go with you."

"Then slip this case of jewels in your bosom, Jane," Esther said, hurriedly. "I will take this one, and the money. Jane," Esther said, suddenly turning and looking earnestly into her face, "I may never return to the cottage with you; but if I do not, if I fail to-night, if you ever see any of my friends, tell them I died in my efforts to save my husband from ruin and despair in the few days left for him to live."

Then silently they began the wearisome ascent. The path was rough and steep, and the darkness prevented them from clearly seeing their way.

All of Esther's senses were on the alert. She imagined voices in the rustling leaves, and sometimes saw strange figures going on before, ever at the same distance from her.

Silently, steadily they crept on, often obliged to stop to rest, till at last they could see through the leaves the outline of a building. Esther's heart sank within her. She knew her husband had preceded her by at least an hour, and she trembled at the thought of the result.

As she neared the entrance, Esther told Jane to conceal herself in the thick underbrush beside the path, and

she pressed on with watchful eye. At the door stood a rough-looking sentinel. She made him understand in Spanish, of which she had learned a few phrases, that she must enter the house.

The soft voice and gentle ways were unfamiliar to the uncouth guard.

"It is impossible, Señorita," he replied in a gruff voice, and leveled his carbine at her breast.

Motionless for a moment Esther stood. Then, some one within slightly unclosed the door. She heard a tumult, and Robert's voice in utter despair and rage exclaim: "You have ruined me!"

In an unguarded moment the sentinel turned. Before he could realize what she had done, Esther had rushed past him and stood within.

In contrast with the outside gloom she was dazed with the brilliant lights, the piles of gold scattered about, the crystal glasses sparkling with ruby liquid, and the motley group surrounding her. She had a confused idea of laborers and miners, the wild cowboy of the plains, with the gentleman in faultless attire and cultured in manner.

Away, beyond them all, was a lonely figure, a wild, haggard face. Esther's lips quivered in attempts to form words that leaped to them, but there was no sound. As she slowly advanced, the people became as shadows growing fainter and fainter in the gray billow of oblivion overwhelming her, and fainting she fell at Robert's side.

Every man sprang to his feet regarding one another with suspicious glances of betrayal. Robert Leighton, with a face like death, raised his hand, and in a husky voice said, "Comrades, she is my wife."

Hands instantly dropped from their bowie knives, while a blending of wonder and compassion were on the

faces of the astonished group. At Robert's words a man elegantly attired hastened from an obscure corner to the front. One glance, then quick as thought a bell sounded, which summoned a Mexican woman in waiting.

"Hurry, Mother Guio," he said, "the señora has fainted."

Esther's entrance had been like a lovely apparition in the midst of lost souls; a breath of fresh, sweet air straight from Heaven within the heated atmosphere of sordid wretchedness; and now as she lay so white and still, her face like chiseled marble, her hair a golden crown, the unconscious pose and grace of form rivalling the sculptor's art, while innocence surrounded her with its protecting charm, every head and heart were reverently bowed in homage.

Mother Guio loosened the dress, and tenderly bathed the deathlike face. Robert Leighton rose, and leaning heavily on his cane, he tottered in front of the waiting group.

"Three years ago," he said in trembling tones—where was the fire and vigor and self-respect of manhood?—"three years ago I met this beautiful woman, then a pure, sweet girl of eighteen. I made an oath she would be mine. I won her away from a quiet, simple, happy country life only to break her heart. I have robbed her of a beautiful girlhood. To-night I have robbed her of all that is left to keep her from want, and save her from utter despair. Are your hearts dead? Will you save her by giving me back my money?"

His face had taken on an ashy hue. Silence followed the words, and alone his listeners left him in their scorn.

"Does she breathe?" a man asked in whisper, he who had summoned the servant.

"She breathes, Señor," was the reply.

Then slowly the glow crept back to lip and cheek, and Esther opened her eyes, the beautiful eyes now heavy with their burden of sorrow. The lights had been turned down, and the scene was strange and weird.

"Where am I?" she questioned.

Then as memory returned, she exclaimed, "Oh, Robert, have I come to this?"

Robert Leighton saw his life passing before him, strong in its tide and black in memory, and he bowed his head and groaned.

"Señora," said he who seemed to rule the place, going to Esther and helping her to rise, "Señora, do not fear. You are safe. Sit here," and he led her to a chair.

Esther raised her eyes—with a look of recognition.

"Is it possible? Is it Señor Mazetta?"

"Yes, I am Mazetta. I have not forgotten the beautiful girl-wife, my charming hostess in the far away eastern city. And," he added looking calmly about him as one with authority, "the life of him who harms you with one word or deed is not worth the smallest Mexican coin."

Led by Señor Mazetta the men gathered at the farther end of the room, where a low conversation followed.

Piece by piece Mazetta gathered a pile of gold. The coins jingled as he dropped them, and again held them in his hand as if to test their weight. Then, thrusting them aside he tied a silken handkerchief in the form of a bag. In it were placed one hundred bills, each bearing on its face the value of one hundred dollars.

"Robert Leighton," he said, returning to his side, "you were the first to teach me the profits and losses in this kind of life. When I first visited your city I was ignorant of the art. I had money. You found me out. You invited me to your home. You used your beautiful girl-

wife as a foil to help win an influence over me. She was innocent of your design. I now know she was innocent. You drew me into your net and caught my gold. I practiced the lessons you taught me, and cursed you for the teaching. Here in this place you accidentally found me. When I looked upon your face I determined to win back double the sum I lost to you. I have accomplished it. Your brain no longer responds to its cunning. You have wantonly used its power and at last it turned upon you. But, señor, dark as may be the sins lying at my door, yours are blacker. I never broke the heart of a young, loving, beautiful girl. I will not grieve one now. To her we restore your treasure.

"Mother Guio," he called, turning to the woman and handing the silken bag, "hide this in the Senora's dress. It is hers by right. It is not ours, Senora. It is yours. We stole it from you, but our hearts are still alive to the suffering of innocence and beauty.

"And, Señor," again looking at Robert, "you must never haunt this place again. "You cannot," he added with sudden thought. "Every man of you except the guards," he said turning to them fiercely, "take your spoils and begone. Begone forever. The house is mine. It will be closed and barred never to be opened."

Clarence was summoned from his usual place in an anteroom, while poor, frightened Jane, waiting in great anxiety, was found, and under protection they were sent ahead to prepare for the return of their master and mistress.

The reaction after the excitement told only too well of Robert's weakness. A litter was hastily improvised on which he was laid, and what they called a Russian chair was arranged for Esther. Then the little company led by Señor Mazetta started down the mountain path.

The cool night air revived Esther, and the chair was very restful. When they arrived at the cottage everything possible was done both for her comfort and for Robert's.

When Señor Mazetta departed he said to Esther: "You are safe. No one will molest you on account of the money. Three men will be stationed to protect you, and every man of us stands ready to assist you. We will see you again in the early morning hours."

Robert was very weak. All strength seemed to have deserted him. Esther could not sleep. Clarence and Jane in an outer room kept watch with her.

"I cannot sleep," Robert would moan, as the minutes passed, tossing nervously on his couch, with a troubled look of unrest. "Are you here, Esther?"

"I am close by you, Robert. You must sleep. Drink this," and Esther held a glass of wine to his lips. "Now try to rest."

But there was no rest for Robert's conscience. The quiet within was full of sounds. Without, the rising wind was full of moans and sobs which tortured him.

"Esther!"

"Yes, Robert."

"My life is nearly lived."

"Do not say that, Robert. Do not think it. Just rest and try to sleep."

"My life is nearly lived, Esther," he repeated. "Will you—will you forgive all the wrong I have done you?"

Even then there was a selfish intonation in the words; a seeking for freedom from painful thoughts rather than repentance from causing another pain. Esther shook with an agitation so great as to cause her voice to tremble.

"Oh, Robert," she sobbed, "do not ask that now—not yet. Wait. Wait till you are better."

"But, Esther, you will forgive?"

"Do you know what you ask, Robert?" Esther said, after a moment of painful silence. "Do you know what you ask when the words fall so lightly from your lips?"

The voice was calm and sweet now, but blending with a cry of despair rang out a note of righteous indignation.

"Can you change all the tears to smiles?" she went on, "and make the heartaches as if they had never been? Can you give me back my soul uncrushed and joyous as you found it? Till you can do this have you a right to ask forgiveness?"

Robert looked through the tears deep down into the secret recesses of her soul. There was no revenge, no wish to torture him, only a sincere struggling with the truth.

"No, Esther," he wailed, "I cannot."

"No," Esther repeated. "What is my forgiveness? It cannot undo the past for either you or me. Nothing can blot it out. Nothing. You made all things desolate for me—the sacred things of the heart as well as the joys of life. Oh, Robert," she pleaded, with a sob of agony, "I cannot be false to you, false to myself, even now. The wounds are too deep and too painful. The scars will always remain, but sometime—sometime perhaps the hurt will grow less. Do not make me answer—not yet."

Even at this moment, when neither realized how near the shadows of death were hovering, Robert's mind could clearly grasp the depth of power dominating her action.

"Yet, Esther, you once loved me. Does not love forgive?"

"Oh, Robert! Will you make me say it now? Think a moment. Did I ever love *you*? You wore another's garb. You were not honest. You stole my heart. You

took what was not yours—my love—and tossed the jewel away. Once I thought all love within me was dead, but, thank God, it still lives and is mine. It was like finding a gem. It gleams and sparkles, and warms my heart to know that such a beautiful thing exists. But once, Robert, I faltered. I will tell you. I was like one chained to a rock in a desolate sea, with only the hissing waves to greet me. Moaning winds were all the music I could hear. I was alone—alone with the dashing spray that chills and kills. I cried for help and the waters mocked me; I prayed for life and the wind sang a requiem; I called to Heaven for mercy and no answer came.

“Then a voice called my name; a voice that was soft and kind; so kind and gentle! How it woke responses in my heart! I listened from afar. Nearer and more loudly rang the words, till one night I stole away from you out into the darkness. The stars looked kindly down upon me; the air was soft and balmy. The world seemed new. Captivity was left behind me. My exultant soul gleefully sang with joy at its freedom. The melody was sweet as the distant music of softly clashing silver bells. Then, suddenly a dense wall of impenetrable blackness arrested my steps. Not a ray of light could pierce it. Out of the gloom something whispered in my ear.

“‘Stop,’ it said. ‘Think what you are doing. This step loses to you all the heights you have gained. On you will fall the scorn. None can understand the impulses which compel you, unless they could be yourself. You will be the sufferer. Keep your soul pure. Turn back.’

“I looked behind. A dim trail of light brightened the backward ascent. I turned and climbed the path—back to you. In that hour I had lived months; yet the time was so short you had but just missed me, and you were

impatiently calling me. And now, Robert, can you lightly ask forgiveness for the misery which could put the dark thought in my heart?"

"Oh, my God!" Robert groaned, "what have I lost! I might have found your love and did not. No, Esther, I will not ask the boon I craved; only this; I ask only this: that sometime, perhaps, you will forget and forgive."

His hand reached out for hers. "Will you try to do this?"

She clasped the hand in both of her own.

"I will try with all my heart and soul and strength," she solemnly breathed.

"I am satisfied. That is more than justice; more than justice. I see it now. Poor girl! Do you think I will live a few days—weeks—months, may be?"

"We will think so. We will hope so. Will you rest now?" and Esther held the wine to his lips.

"Yes, I will rest. You will stay? You will not leave me?"

"I will never leave you," Esther promised.

"Will you kiss me once? Only once?"

"I will kiss you as a mother kisses her grieved child."

The sobs choked her. With streaming eyes she bent over the earnest face. Lingered, sweet, caressing was the touch of her lips upon Robert's brow.

"And now will you sleep?" Esther begged.

"Yes. May I have your hand again? Will you sing and bring the dreams?"

With one hand clasping Robert's trembling fingers, and the other soothing the weary head, she softly sang a hymn, till the quiet breathing told her he no longer heard.

Slowly the minutes passed, each one like an hour. Just

as the sun was gilding the eastern mountain peaks there was a slight stir in the house. Robert opened his eyes with a questioning look.

"It is Señor Mazetta, I think," Esther answered.

Jane threw open the door.

Just as Señor Mazetta, with hushed footsteps, entered the room, Robert Leighton silently passed over the threshold of Death.

NOTE.—As the mountain scene is a leaf from the real Esther's life, it may be of interest to know that, later, she was able to use the entire income of the amount returned for the comfort of others.

CHAPTER XIX.

"SEÑORA, be not troubled about any of the arrangements," Mazetta said later, as he gently led Esther away and left her in Jane's care. "Others are with me. We will attend to all the details as well as possible under the circumstances. Have you relatives near?"

"No one, Señor Mazetta. They are all in the East."

With a great longing in her heart Esther thought of the dear ones—Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy trusting in her happiness, Richard and Ethel and Dr. Parkman hoping all is well with her; she thought of the sorrow in their hearts if they knew the perplexities through which she was passing, and passively yielded to kind authority.

An hour later she was called into the room where the body of Robert Leighton lay ready for burial, and she was left alone with the dead.

Silent and tearless she stood struggling with surging thoughts. The eyes which had been so tender and so cruel were forever closed. Out of the lips unkind words would never come. The hands folded and quiet would never bring grief to her soul. The heart so false to her was still.

"He is dead," she silently breathed. "He is dead."

Minutes came and went, as she looked down on the motionless face.

"Not yet," she cried, "not yet can I forgive even the dead."

At last she turned with streaming eyes to receive from

Jane a handful of flowers, wild and fresh as the mountain forest. Reverently she arranged them around the sleeper, their sweetness touching brow and cheek and breast.

The next morning, a long wagon drawn by a mule came to the door. Two strangers took from it a casket, and under Señor Mazetta's directions the body was placed within, resting in masses of bloom. On the following day a few of the people from the lower cottages were present at the last rites. The children from the hamlet brought their flowers and their kisses to their beloved "Lady of the Mountains," as they had named Esther. A clergyman from a distance came and made a prayer. Then, around a curve in the mountain road, over a little way in a glen shielded by trees and shrubs and flowers, the small procession wended its way. Quietly, solemnly, the last few words were said and Robert Leighton was left sleeping with nature and nature's God.

The kindness of Esther's strange friends was not yet ended. Following the advice of Señor Mazetta, Esther went to the nearest large town and safely deposited her money and jewels, except one casket, until her return to San Francisco. She did this under the protection of Señor Mazetta, but he followed at a distance.

"Senora," he said with honesty, "some might know what my occupation here has been, and unjustly speak your name with mine."

When at last the house above was stripped of all its appurtenances, barred and bolted, and Señor Mazetta, the last to leave it, came to bid Esther good-by, she said to him: "After so much kindness, so many favors, allow me to restore what is yours."

She opened the case containing the diamonds purchased the day after Señor Mazetta's dinner at her house.

"These are not mine," she simply said with clear, friendly eyes. "I am sure they were bought with your money. I have worn them once. I can never wear them again because they are not mine."

Señor Mazetta took the gems and studied their brilliancy.

"They are rare jewels, Señora. Are you sure my money bought them?"

"I am very sure, Señor. I could never wear them. I thought perhaps another's tears as bitter as my own were shining in their depths. That may not have been. But after all that has passed I cannot keep what is yours. Will you take them?"

"Yes, Señora, I will accept them," Señor Mazetta replied, holding the jewels in his hand. "They are mine, now, are they?" he said.

"Yes," Esther answered, earnestly.

"You have restored them to the one from whom their purchase money was illy-gotten."

"Yes, Señor," Esther replied with wonder in the words.

"The money which bought these jewels was pure, Señora, when it came to me," Señor Mazetta went on. "It was lawful wealth which was taken from me. There was no stain upon it to trouble your pure soul. I was very rich. I have no use for them. I have enough without them. And now, let me present these gems to you in homage to the loveliest woman I ever saw. In reality they are your own. We could not return that night all we had taken from you. They are yours. Will you accept them in the spirit in which they are given?"

Before Esther could reply Mazetta had put the casket in her hand, and with a low bow he was gone. She stood a long time looking at the jewels, in whose history were woven so many moments of doubt and joy, hope and

despair, then she securely locked them in a compartment of a small safe. She wondered if memory would ever become a dim perspective, solemn, sacred, but again granting clear vistas of the nearer faith and joy of life. Until then the sparkling depths of the gems flashing out upon her should remain in utter darkness. As yet she had but little confidence in the heart of the world, so rudely had her faith been shaken.

The days came and went, but Esther still lingered in the mountain home. After a time she began to realize it was an apathy of both mind and body which held her, and against which she must struggle. She had forgotten youth was yet hers. She felt old, but calmly reasoned that age had some rights which must not be ignored. She was scarcely conscious that the soothing rest from care and anxiety was stirring into life the vigorous potentialities of her being. In a semi-passive state they had been gently slumbering, till nature itself should send them forth in new verdure.

Letters from the East one day suddenly started this train of thought. As she read and re-read the encouraging, loving messages, she seemed to throw off a morbid wish for isolation which had haunted her, while a smile, a stranger in the once bright face, danced in glee at its welcome.

It was Uncle Eben who had caused this bit of sunshine in one of his characteristic remarks concerning his own struggles with Satan.

When the news of Robert's death reached him it threw him into quite a perturbed state of mind.

"Ma," he said after a few days of wrestling with the subject, "I'm sartin I'm in a very degenerate state."

"Wall," Aunt Nancy replied in perfect sincerity, "you

have them spells occasionally, Eben, you know. Can't you put it off a little while?"

"The more I try the more it won't, Ma," Uncle Eben replied, disconsolately.

"Don't load the spirit too heavily to once," Aunt Nancy suggested. "We must think about poor Esther now."

"That's jest it, Nancy. That is jest what is the matter. I have tried the best I know how to clothe my feelings in sackcloth and ashes, and all the other scratchy things they tell us we must, when we ought to be humble before our sins, but they don't work a mite."

"Have you ben sinnin' again, Eben? What now? After so many wrastlin's with conscience, I should think you'd give it up. Let it have its own way. No use to kick against its pricks—in your case, anyhow."

"No, it ain't. My toes are 'most worn out already tryin' it. At this rate I'm afraid they won't last me through. I know I ought to be sorry Robert Leighton is dead."

"Wall, ain't you?" Aunt Nancy asked in surprise.

"Ma," Uncle Eben said, impressively, "do you remember what Pedy Porter down in Maplewood said, when her niece's first husband died? She said she felt like a hippercrit goin' around with a black bow on her bonnit, and her heart dancin' inside o' her like a fiddle. That's jest my condition."

"Hush, Eben! Don't let the words o' the mouth reveal such wickedness o' heart. I am astonished at your state o' perverseness."

"But, Nancy, what troubles me most is, whether it is wickedness. I hate dreadfully to fight agin shortcomin's, if they ain't shortcomin's. I have allus had my misgivin's about that air city sprig. If he has ben what he made Esther believe he was, I can mourn in right down airnest.

If he wasn't, if he made her unhappy, if he was a cheat and a delusion and a snare—wall, I want ter jest set down and have a real good season o' rejoicin'. And what is more, I don't believe sanctification says you mustn't. Jest because anybody dies, does it make 'em a saint? I'd like ter know that now."

"There, there, Eben. Don't spin around any more like a kitten after her tail. Set down, do," Aunt Nancy begged. "When you get out on that strain I don't know nothin' where you be. Don't be so eager to take the Lord's work out of His hands."

"Wall, I know what I'm goin' ter do before I punish myself any longer on onsartinties. I'm goin' ter write to Richard Benson and ask him to come up here. I'm goin' now to know just where I stand on this question. Ethel must come, too. She is a nice little body, and she loves Esther, what is better."

Uncle Eben's letter met with ready response, but as Richard could leave home only one night he came alone.

Uncle Eben was troubled how to introduce the matter over which he was so anxious. The thought that he "might 'a ben harborin' unjust calumny" made him a little modest about expressing his feelings to Richard.

After talking over all the details of what had taken place since Robert and Esther went to California, as far as they knew them, he threw out a suggestion about the property.

"There will have to be an administrator," he said, "or was there a will?"

"No, there was no will," Richard replied. "I have been appointed administrator. Esther has given me power of attorney. I shall attend to everything for her."

"And you will do it well and honest," was the hearty reply. "That is just as I wanted it to be. Now, about

this berry business," Uncle Eben began, nervously. "How will that be settled?"

"That was all settled years ago, Uncle Eben," Richard smiled. "There were never any papers, were there?"

"No."

"As I understand it, there were no writings of any kind."

"None at all."

"And Robert presented you the whole income when he was here three years ago?"

"Yes, he sartin did."

"Well, then," Richard affirmed, "that transaction cannot appear in the settlement of the estate."

"No, it can't," and Uncle Eben shook his head thoughtfully. "But, Mr. Benson, before I go any further, I must know a few things. What made Robert start into that notion in the first place? He just did that so as to git me under obligations in case he couldn't git Esther without usin' it. He made that prayer to cheat me. And now I want to know if he made Esther happy; if he was a man of good principles and disposition, only a bit roguish like; and if my little girl was glad and satisfied. You must be honest with me, Richard."

"Uncle Eben," Richard replied, "I wish I could answer you as you would like me to, but I will not deceive you. I shall have to say that Robert grievously disappointed us all."

"Do you hear that, Ma?" Uncle Eben asked, with a tremor in his voice, as Aunt Nancy entered the room.

"Yes, I heard the last remark, but don't be too excited, Eben."

Then as Richard briefly unfolded to them the story, with as much charity as possible, Uncle Eben, the tears

filling his eyes, could only murmur again and again, "My poor little girl! My brave little queen!"

At the close he declared with emphasis, skipping about the room, "I won't keep them berries. I won't tech the money. My forbearance shan't be bought. I won't have 'em."

"There, there, Eben," Aunt Nancy soothed, "just set down and talk calm about it."

"You do not wish to grieve Esther about them?" Richard said.

"No, I don't," and Uncle Eben sat down with a sigh. "But I vum if I'll eat another dum one of 'em myself."

"You would eat them to please Esther, would you not?" Richard went on with quiet authority.

"I would eat the devil to please Esther," was the quick reply, "and run the risk o' his cuttin' up didoes in my insides."

"There, there, Eben, don't be on such intimate terms with him. You speak too familiarly," Aunt Nancy advised, patting the good man on the shoulder.

"Besides, you must remember it was the elder Mr. Leighton's money, and now it is Esther's," Richard said. "She commanded me in the very first letter after Robert's death, to see you had all the comforts and luxuries you could think of."

"And now, Mr. Benson, I will be honest with you," Uncle Eben began, earnestly. "What I really wanted to find out was whether I unjustly accused Robert or not. I had a middlin' sharp turn o' conscience all around. I find I can never do the subject justice. Ma, I won't say a word out loud, but if sometimes you see my lips movin' pretty spry when I'm off in a corner by myself, don't speak; it might send an unbecomin' word right out plain. I shall only be havin' a little relief to my bilin' emo-

tions. Of course I shall have a dreadful time repentin', but it will pay."

After Richard was gone, promising to come again to carry out Esther's suggestions, Uncle Eben wrote her a letter. It was several days in the process of construction; then, a neighbor forgot to post it till he had carried it for three weeks in an inside pocket; added to this was a long delay on the way from San Francisco, so that the missive did not reach its destination till October.

This was the letter which brought the smiles with it up to the mountain cottage, and seemed to bring Esther back in touch with the world and her friends. It was such a characteristic letter, relating the news of the neighborhood, the success of the writer's summer labors, a dissertation on the wonderful mixture of desirable and undesirable qualities in Hiram Foss caused by a hindrance in a piece of work, ending with a hint of "diffikilties" in connection with the "watcher after unwary souls," although the reason for the difficulties was omitted.

With Uncle Eben's letter came one from Richard on business affairs, more recently written, a remembrance from Ethel and Mrs. Parkman, and a kind, very kind and courteous note from Dr. Parkman. All sent urgent requests to return to them, and after conquering the disinclination to refuse she resolved to grant their wishes.

Activity brought new life in its train. She made arrangements with Clarence and Jane to remain in the cottage, and with the return of former exhilaration in whatever she undertook all preparations were soon completed.

The last act was a visit in the early morning of her departure to Robert's grave.

"It is a lonely place to sleep, Robert, but a beautiful one," she murmured as she strewed it with flowers. And here, awaiting the time when she could fulfill her promise

to the dead, she made a grave in memory with a few scattered blossoms, realizing that it were better to—

*“Act in the living Present,
Heart within and God o’erhead.”*

But Esther’s life had not yet found a smooth groove in which it would run with little deviation, one day quite prophetic of what the next would be.

When she arrived in San Francisco, warmly welcomed by old friends and acquaintances, she learned that a small party of them had already arranged for an extended trip. It was to be a quiet journey, more by sea than by land, specially designed for rest, with just enough pleasure to be profitable.

“Will you accompany us, Mrs. Leighton?” was the eager question from every one.

Advices from home friends expressed disappointment at not having her with them after so long an absence, but encouraged her to join the excursion party if she felt inclined, as a constant change of scene would be beneficial—all but one. Dr. Parkman’s regrets were unmodified.

A few newspaper paragraphs in society columns, which Esther had seen as she was leaving New York, after some of Robert’s adventures were discovered, had not lost their sting, in the proud sensitive spirit, and were not without influence in her decision to accompany her friends.

One of their number was a stranger to her, a Chinese nobleman, a man of “high degree,” as he was called in his native land. Having traveled in Europe, he had become progressive in his views. In an attempt to introduce better systems of education, and to do away with many objectionable customs which had been great ob-

stacles in the way of his country's welfare, he had been charged with treason and banished.

He immediately came to San Francisco, declared his rejection of every phase of Chinese religion, adopted American dress and customs, and loyally took the plain, American name, Andrew Mason.

He was of good presence, highly educated, and very courteous and agreeable in manner. He soon became a general favorite with the guests of the hotel. He heard of Esther's beauty and talent from her friends, also of her long seclusion in the mountains, and when she came among them his attentions to her were kind and delicate. His knowledge of places enabled him to suggest to the tourists many points of interest outside the conventional limit.

The route decided upon was by rail to New Orleans, where a short time was spent, thence directly to a French port, with a month given to Paris. This was followed by a trip through Palestine, and thence to Egypt, where they remained till the unhealthy March winds warned them it were better to linger no longer among those strong fascinations of an old civilization.

On their return to Cairo the party separated. The greater number felt they must return to their homes as soon as practicable. Those who decided to extend the trip comprised a Mr. Sampson and wife from Sacramento, a Miss Brandon from San José, Mr. Mason and Esther.

Mr. Sampson possessed a jovial nature, quite undisturbed by trifles incident to traveling. Mrs. Sampson was a motherly body, making an agreeable chaperone, while Miss Brandon was devoted to literature, and gave much of her time to study and taking notes.

On their arrival in Cairo all found letters awaiting them,

"Yours, Mrs. Leighton, seem to bring both sunshine and shadow," Mrs. Sampson said, having finished the perusal of her own, while Esther still lingered over hers.

"Yes," was the reply, "they contain the old story of birth and death, hand in hand. Some very dear friends announce the arrival of a daughter, whose name is Florence Esther Benson. Another gives the death of a woman whom I saw but once. And yet it was the comforts and luxuries, provided through friends by me, which she wished about her during the last few days. There was nothing she quite so much enjoyed as the flowers I ordered. She was in rather poor circumstances, and I am glad I could contribute to her happiness. Her last words were my name and Cecil's. That is the name of her boy, and I promised to care for him."

"Was she a widow?" Mrs. Sampson inquired.

"Yes," Esther replied with an abstracted air, as she arose to make preparations for their departure.

A few days later they were on their way to the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER XX.

THE cruise in the Mediterranean was one long delight. Many of its isles and historic places were visited at leisure, each traveler, however, concurring in the wish to keep near the seaboard.

Here, the mystic glamor of a far-away past dispelled the present. To Esther, the earth and air were filled with invisible spirits whispering of poetry, art and mystery. The days full of novelty, spent in living more with the past than with the present, threw sort of a spell over her sensibilities, making a day like a week, a month like a year. Once, when she heard some young girls, also visitors, confiding to each other their happiness, she complacently smiled at the certainty that her days of romance were over—this girl of twenty-two. The idea brought both pleasure and pain; pleasure that the pain of it was over, and pain because she believed her dreams would never be realized.

Flitting thus hither and thither, the quiet days so full of enjoyment passed only too rapidly.

One twilight in June, they were all seated among some ruins, the deliciously cool air tempting them to linger in the enchanted land as far into the summer as possible. The first shadow of the journey had crossed Esther's pathway that morning.

Word had come from Richard which was a surprise to all interested. He had delayed the information as

long as possible, thinking that matters could rest till her return; besides, he did not wish to intrude unpleasant subjects upon her attempt to forget the past and adjust herself to the future, but action had become imperative.

In settling the estate, it was found that Robert had become deeply indebted to both acquaintances and strangers, who were ignorant of the provision of his father's will, and who had taken security on what they knew was well invested property. As Richard knew what would be Esther's answer in regard to the payment of debts, he had used the authority given him and settled all obligations; but, he wrote, it would necessitate a change in her plans for Cecil at least for the present, and perhaps in her own expenditures.

When she came out this evening, she had by chance brought Hawthorne's "The House of Seven Gables," instead of his "Marble Fawn," as she intended. Among several disconnected pages which she read she came upon a conversation between Holgrove and Phœbe.

"Our first youth is of no value," Holgrove said, "for we are never conscious of it until after it is gone. But sometimes—always, I suspect, unless one is exceedingly unfortunate—there comes a sense of second youth, gushing out of the heart's joy at being in love. The bemoaning of one's self, over the first careless, shallow gayety of youth departed, and this profound happiness at youth regained,—so much deeper, and richer than that we lost—are essential to the soul's development."

And again:—"Just think a moment," said Holgrove, "and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by-gone times—to Death, if we give the matter the right word. A dead man sits on all our judgments; and living judges do but search out and repeat his decisions. We read in dead men's books, and laugh at dead men's

jokes, and cry at dead men's pathos. Turn our eyes to what point we may, a dead man's white, immitigable face encounters them, and freezes our very heart."

"Will a dead face always hover about me?" Esther moaned under her breath. "Will the pale hands ever reach out to thwart me? Will a dead Presence always pursue me and freeze my heart?"

So deeply was she lost in revery, that she was all unconscious when the others threw aside their books. Not till a question was twice addressed to her, did she realize they were having an animated discussion over the future of the American Republic, which led to other topics. Mr. Mason spoke of the progress of religious belief; how, to the Greeks nature overflowed with deities; how, "in each grove was a presiding genius, and in every stream a protecting nymph;" that the Romans concentrated their worship on a smaller number of gods, and the people now occupying much of their country worshipped but three, the one supreme Ruler, Christ and the Virgin; while a great part of Christendom acknowledge but two, which they call one, and the number is increasing, who believe in the one Supreme Being.

"Now," he said, "is not the principle the same throughout, from the adoration of idols, fire, sun, the Greek divinities, the Roman gods, up to the one Unknowable? It was a feeling of worship and reverence and sacrifice for the gods they knew. Slowly but surely each nation becomes a stepping stone to something higher, and time reaches out a hand of assistance to less favored ones. I am speaking now of what we call civilization, morality, religion, and not of the fine arts; in these, heathen Greece still leads, and heathen China has led in some of the rarest. As for religion, this, for instance," he went on earnestly, picking up a magazine containing Thomas

Wentworth Higginson's translation of the one complete poem of Sappho's genius preserved for us, and the perusal of which had started the present conversation. "Is not this a sincere invocation to the god she knew—Venus, the goddess of love, or Aphrodite, as the Grecians called her?

*"Beautiful-throned, immortal Aphrodite.
Daughter of Zeus, beguiler, I implore thee,
Weigh me not down with weariness and anguish,
O thou most holy.*

*"Come to me now. If ever thou in kindness,
Hearkenest my words,—and often hast thou hearkened,
Heeding and coming from the mansion golden
Of thy great Father.*

*"Yoking thy chariot borne by thy most lovely
Consecrated birds, with dusky-tinted pinions,
Wafting swift wings from utmost heights of heaven
Through the mid-ether;*

*"Swiftly they vanished, leaving thee, O goddess,
Smiling, with face immortal in its beauty,
Asking why I grieved, and why in utter longing
I had dared call thee;*

*"Asking what I sought, thus helpless in desiring,
Wildered in brain, and spreading nets of passion
Alas, for whom; and saidst thou, who has harmed thee?
O my poor Sappho!*

*"Though now he flies, ere long he shall pursue thee;
Fearing thy gifts, he too in turn shall bring them;
Loveless to-day, to-morrow he shall woo thee,
Though thou shouldst spurn him;*

*"Thus seek me now, O holy Aphrodite!
Save me from anguish, give me all I ask for,
Gifts at thy hand; and thine, shall be the glory,
Sacred protector!"*

"Here," he said after the reading, "we have the same yearning for help from a higher Power than self, the same sincere belief in its efficacy. And as rhythm is a universal law of nature, nations must rise and fall. According to this law, the civilization, religion, arts of your own Europe and America will decline, though out of their death may rise something far superior; and underlying the progress may be a religion quite unlike that of the present day. Why, then, should nationality with its own peculiar customs form such a barrier, as some consider it, in business, educational developments, or marriage? If an individual be ahead of his country, why, because he is of that people, should he be ostracized from these relations?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Esther looked up to find a pair of searching eyes fastened upon her, as if the question were directed to her alone.

Of late a dread had come upon her—the dread of causing pain. She instinctively felt the friend was becoming a lover, and she had shunned Mr. Mason's society as much as politeness would allow, feeling she could never reciprocate the affection.

After a moment's hesitation she said indifferently, "I have never thought much about the matter. There are so many things to think about we must sometimes accept the result of other's thoughts. Other's experience may help one settle his own difficulties. The story of the ages may lead us to be more charitable towards views unlike our own. This reminds me, Mr. Mason, of the story of

the god-stone which you promised us. Was it associated with a religious belief?"

"Hardly a part of the general religion," was the reply. "Different opinions in various localities are held concerning customs not considered vital. In some provinces, including that of my family, the god-stone is believed to be sacred, and it is held in great esteem throughout the whole empire.

"In the earlier centuries there was discovered in remote China a large, rare gem which was presented to the Ruler. He had this gem cut into a number of small ones and presented one to several of the nobles, those of high degree, to be kept as heirlooms. They could never be sold or be taken from the country under penalty of death. At the death of the possessor they were to be given to the nearest of kin, and so handed down from generation to generation.

"Later, more of the stone was taken from a mine. The value attached to it was so great that a special officer was appointed to take charge of the ornaments used in the personal decoration of the Emperor. All kinds of jewels were made from it, including those worn in the hair. It is hard, like a diamond, but brittle, and required great skill and patience to cut it, and is very rare to this day. With the exception of those first given by the Emperor, which are called god-stones, it is called Yu. Your books name it jade.

"In color the stone varies from an ivory white to a dark handsome green. The exceptional colors are red, black, yellow, turquoise and deeper blue. The one in our family, and which would be mine if I had not been made an exile, is one of the most beautiful of the gems. The upper part is a rich delicate blue; some have likened it to the blue of the sky after a rain. The lower part is ivory white, in which costly diamonds have been imbedded.

From my present knowledge of life and its many phases, of course to me it has lost all its sacred qualities. It is a jewel for a queen—a queen of beauty.”

“And that jewel belongs to you by right,” Mr. Sampson stoutly asserted at the close of the recital. “I should have it.”

“You speak as an American,” Mr. Mason returned. “For advocating the principles which are bulwarks in your country, I was banished. It would be death to be recognized in the empire.”

“But it is yours,” Mr. Sampson reiterated. “I would have it sent to me.”

“It must not be taken from the country.”

“You do not have any superstition about that?”

“No, indeed.”

“Well, then?”

“Those who have it in possession, believe in the superstition. Your standpoint is a heritage quite free from that taint. You belong to a nation where a man has the right to demand justice.”

“Yes, that is so,” Mr. Sampson replied thoughtfully. “While I have been living in the past ages, I have many times wondered what their people would say if they could live in America; or England, either, for that matter. The night we tented with the pyramids, I felt almost like a mummy myself. I occasionally pinched my arm to be sure I was alive and belonged to the nineteenth century. If those old mortals could only have lived till now, what an immense amount of happiness they would have enjoyed on the way.”

“What an amount of unhappiness they have escaped,” Esther said. “That is one great comfort, that whatever the burden may be,—poverty, sickness, the crushing of one’s nature or sorrow, it is all ended in a few years.”

"That is true," Mrs. Sampson answered, "only we do not realize it while we are living out the burden. We think and act and suffer, as if our own troubles were the vision-point of the universe, and eternal."

"Yes," Mr. Sampson declared, "and I am not sure but we worship as many idols as the heathen, though they may not be made of wood or stone. There is Miss Brandon, now, off by herself studying some fad, according to the idolatry of some custom of the present day, and she has lost the story of the god-stone. I am going over to see what she is doing. Will you come, Mrs. Sampson?"

"I thought we might as well retire," Mr. Sampson went on blandly when at a distance. "Mr. Mason has been discreetly reserved in his attention to Mrs. Leighton, but I can see where his mind is. That question about an individual being ostracized because of his nationality had a hidden meaning. Poor fellow! He may as well know his fate to-night as any time."

"Why do you say, 'poor fellow,' Henry?" Mrs. Sampson remonstrated. "I am quite sure Mrs. Leighton has a warm regard for him as a friend. I think she cares nothing more for him, but you cannot tell what may happen if the idea is put into her head. Mr. Mason is very agreeable."

"But—" Mr. Sampson began, then hesitated.

"Yes, but—" Mrs. Sampson repeated. "There is a volume in that unfinished sentence."

"More than one volume, Cordelia. It is not prejudice which influences one in these things. It is the difference resulting from generations of education, religion, custom. Neither individuals nor races so widely apart can ever blend. But I would have that jewel some way. We must tell Miss Brandon about it."

Esther, too, was thinking of the gem and questioned more about it.

"It has always been considered the most precious of stones by Orientals," Mr. Mason continued. "In Li-Ki,—the book of Rites,—it is likened to the rainbow solidified and turned to stone. A jewel for a queen—for a queen of beauty. For the loved one. And there is only one whom I wish it to adorn."

Esther looked up with startled eyes, and could not mistake the meaning of those fastened upon her, but she remained silent.

"Only one," the earnest voice said. "May I name her? may I say it is yourself?"

"No, you must not speak to me in that way," Esther quickly replied. "I cannot listen."

"Yes, I must speak, though you have lately avoided me, and indirectly contended that there is an insuperable barrier between different nationalities. I must tell you how Confucius compared the polish and brilliant hues of the god-stone to virtue and humanity; its compactness to truth; the pure sound which it emits when struck, to music; its shades of color are loyalty, and the seams in the interior but visible from the outside are figurative of sincerity. Virtue, goodness, truth, music, sincerity,—you have them all. Can I keep from saying the jewel is a fit emblem for you? Or that I love you? That I ask you to marry me?"

"Love implies so much," Esther replied evasively. "It is often mistaken for only friendship. Many times it is used for a cloak for deception. You are mistaken. You have deceived yourself. It is another you love. Perhaps some one you have never seen, but the love is in your heart; you have mistaken it for me because I am here."

"You have little faith."

"No, I have great faith in love, but it is not for me."

"Some unpleasant phase of life has given you the doubt. Can nothing dispel it?"

"It is useless to strive against fate."

"It is not your fate. Is there no way to prove it?"

"But I do not love you."

"Does not love win love? Is there anything better than to be loved? Can one do more than offer his life to prove his love? If I will bring you the god-stone, will you believe in the sincerity it symbolizes?"

Esther shuddered.

"Not that," she said. "It might cost a life."

"When the Knights of old—old in *your* history—went forth to conquer as I have read, it was not only the preservation of their own life which gave them a strong bravery, equal to overcoming all obstacles; it was the love of the fair lady interwoven with that life, without which it would have been a dreary moor. This gave them both courage and caution. I should meet with danger, but I should not forget the caution. The jewel is mine. Injustice deprived me of it. It shall be yours as proof of my love. Can a love which endures so much be aught but tender and true? When I place the jewel on your breast will you believe it? If I will do this thing for you will you then be mine?"

The words had been quick and passionate, and now awaited their answer.

Why had there not come to Esther a white-winged messenger, which had flitted here, there, unable to keep pace with her? Why did the deepening shadows cast about her such a gloom? Was the song of the ages enveloping her in a mystic veil, holding her bound in a charm of unreality? Was it the magnetic force of a per-

sonality directing her? Was a dead Presence still controlling her, making her lose grasp of herself?

She thought of friends—yet they were not hers. Richard and Ethel, all that friends could be; but they were each other's, not hers. One, swift, keen pain shot through her heart as Neidhurd Parkman's face was before her. She missed the pleasant notes he had sent, and wondered why they were now denied.

After all of what use was the struggle? She unfastened the slender chain around her neck and drew the locket from her bosom. One did not make their own cross; only had to bear the one made for them. Why try to have a heart for any fate? Why cling to ideals which made one miserable? "On thy lips the smile of truth." What mattered it? If fate demanded a lower plane, why not accept it and be reconciled and at rest? At rest? Could one be at rest even then?

There are moments when desperation breaks over us like a great wave, engulfing us in its relentless depths; when we cry out for strength to take fate in our own strong grasp and throttle it, but we are powerless. Happy is he who emerges from the sound of the dashing billows with only disappointed hopes; with no rash act to forever prick the soul.

"If I do this thing to prove my love will you be mine?"

Faint and low, hardly more than a whisper, with an unheard dismal shriek echoing and re-echoing through the heart, came the answer,

"Yes."

CHAPTER XXI.

"WELL, Cordelia!" Mr. Sampson exclaimed the next morning on learning the surprising news that Mr. Mason had left an apology for a hasty departure accompanied with courteous regrets. "At last the blessed chance has come to me," he declared with much elation, "the delicious satisfaction of spirit that is really the sole prerogative of women. I can say, 'I told you so.'"

"What did you tell me, pray?" Mrs. Sampson innocently inquired.

They were in their room after breakfast, and Mrs. Sampson was in a genial mood over some purchases made the day before, and was examining them.

"I told you that Mr. Mason was desperately infatuated with Mrs. Leighton; that the steam from the silent simmering of that state would not be able to resist escape much longer."

"Who contradicted you, my dear?"

"Nobody," Mr. Sampson admitted, with plumes of victory waving with less confidence. "You had hopes however."

"Hopes, Henry!"

"Yes, hopes. Women are always alert and brisk to help it on, if a match, as it is called, is in progress. I wager there was a proposal last night."

"I shall risk nothing against that assertion," Mrs. Sampson said quietly.

"And he was refused, Cordelia."

"Did I say he would not be, Henry? Did I not qualify my approval of Mr. Mason with a but, followed by a dash?"

"Not till after I had said it, Cordelia. Do let me enjoy those four little words once."

"You may enjoy them, Henry, to your heart's content, but their foundation is like that of the house which the floods washed away. Do not be too joyful till we wait and learn something for a certainty."

Nothing, however, could be surmised from any word or action of Esther's. She, herself, felt as if it were all a dream, an impossible reality, so swiftly had it passed, that moonlight hour among the ruins, with a weird, silent song floating out from chamber and passageway.

Of only one thing was she firm in her belief, that Mr. Mason would never return with the gem. Away from her the passing spell would be broken; he would soon consider the result of obtaining it not worth the attempt. If he should come—she had not yet been wholly aroused from her indifference. The knowledge that she would possess the rarest jewel in many lands, won by a lover, was not without its charm. At least she would be loved. A passive condition of herself, basking in the halo of an affection surrounding her, though she were not a part of it, might bring a serenity of mind more to be desired than aught else. She remembered the time when she believed that kindness alone would create a love in her heart. And had she not said, "I do not love you"? If the risk were taken it would be his own. When they parted that night, at his request for a lover's farewell, she had said, "Not yet. I am free till you come with the gem?"

"It may be months, it may be a few weeks," was the answer, "when I shall claim my own."

Every one missed the genial companionship of Mr. Mason. His absence seemed to create an unrest even in Mr. Sampson's placid mind.

"I have a proposition to make," he said one day to Miss Brandon. "Instead of remaining here in the Mediterranean another week, roaming around, as we intended and returning home, I propose we once more extend our trip, and leave here immediately. Suppose we catch a glimpse of the Alps, a little of Switzerland, and have a bit of modern life and scenery in general. We have been buried in ruins and mouldy stuff so long, we need to get resurrected before actual life begins again. I have won Mrs. Sampson over to the idea, if you and Mrs. Leighton are favorably inclined. She positively objects to another break in our party."

"I should like it above all things," Miss Brandon heartily responded. "And you, Mrs. Leighton?" she asked.

"I have been away from my Eastern friends so long," Esther demurred. "I had almost begun to count the weeks when I would be with them."

"Should you visit the East before returning to San Francisco?" Mr. Sampson asked.

"No," was the reply, "because when I am again there I wish to remain, and circumstances require my attention in San Francisco first."

"Your friends are all well?"

"In the best of health as far as heard from."

"Nothing there to worry you? I can never stand that," Mr. Sampson declared. "A grain of worry spoils a pound of pleasure for me."

"No, nothing to specially trouble. It is of no use to worry over what is already done. It is only a great longing to see them all."

"You are already here," Miss Brandon pleaded.

"It will be short distances to travel," Mrs. Sampson suggested.

"And the time will not be long," Mr. Sampson affirmed. "I must reach California before October, and shall stop in San Francisco a few weeks. Captain Rodney Martindale, the son of a friend, has a leave of absence that month and will be in that city. I always make it a point to see him. He is in the United States Navy. His ship coasts along the Western shores, with an occasional trip of three or six months."

"He will not visit his home?" Mrs. Sampson questioned.

"No, he has been there recently. His parents live in Philadelphia," Mr. Sampson explained. "They are too old to change their residence. I would like to have Mrs. Leighton meet Captain Martindale," Mr. Sampson added, with a sly look at his wife. "They have many tastes in common, if he is a captain, and one is art. He is no artist, himself, of course, but he is about the best judge of the good points in a picture, outside of regular critics, I ever saw. He appreciates them. Besides, Mrs. Leighton, I just want to hear your voices together. We'll charge admission to the parlors of the Palace Hotel," he laughed.

"Mrs. Leighton may not care at all about those things," Mrs. Sampson suggested. "Captain Martindale is a fine man, though. Sometime, Mr. Sampson will give you his experience on the night his vessel was wrecked. Such times reveal character, and his was not found wanting. He is brave and chivalrous, and there is lot of poetry and genuine sentiment in him. And sentiment is one of the highest and most sacred elements of our natures. Filial love is a sentiment, the love of home is

a sentiment, so is patriotism. I like him just for that one virtue."

"I shall enjoy the extension of time," Esther replied, "and I do not wish to inconvenience the rest. But for me it must not be all pleasure. I will study in Paris a part of the time, and be with you the remainder."

And thus it was finally arranged. A few days later found Esther at work in her studio, with the others settled near Lake Geneva.

How quiet and restful were those few weeks. Esther was somewhat weary of continued change of scene; moreover, not since her girlhood had she seemed so much at rest. Life was flowing on as in other lives, calm and peaceful, with no sudden or unexpected developments threatening its serenity. She neither looked for Mr. Mason with the jewel nor without it. What happened that night in the weird, dreamy light, was only one of the incidents which sometimes come into lives, without premeditation or explanation. It would pass as it had come. She worked earnestly and devotedly, that she might improve every moment of the opportunities presented.

"How can you do things like that?" a young woman, a fellow-worker, said to her one day, pointing to her easel. "If you want a sunny, summer sky, there you have its soft beauty with the filmy clouds idly floating about, and a warm, delicious haze veiling the hills, while the shadows in the valleys tempt you into their cool retreats. Everything is buoyant and eloquent with joy, throwing over the whole such a charm, that it makes you glad simply to live in so beautiful a world, where there is nothing to do but enjoy its dreamy languor. How can you do these things?" she repeated. "Look at mine! And there is the little gem of a picture you showed me

the other day, which you have named, 'Solitude.' That was never painted in a studio. Those great mountains are too real. I wish I might ask where they are."

"They are in California," Esther confided. "Nature was my teacher."

"Well," the young woman went on in admiration, "the atmosphere you have created about them, is a great success, so lonely in their majesty with the threatening clouds hanging over them, shutting out the world as with a veil of impenetrable gloom. And the wind. It is not harsh or strong—only a moan which never ends. The one figure, sitting on a bare rock in all this loneliness, makes you feel as if she were the only being in existence; there is no companion, not even a bird, in all the wide world to share her life. Ugh! It makes me shudder. How can you do it?" the speaker questioned in eager sincerity, as she turned away with a sigh. "Will I ever attain a tenth part of it?"

Poor girl! She did not realize that the brush of the one was only swayed by technical exactness, while that of the other dipped into the glowing colors of the soul.

When there could be no further delay, it was with genuine regret that Esther bade adieu to the little Parisian studio and her daily lessons. The increasing summer heat was nothing; she would have enjoyed portraying its flowers and beauty, but the wishes of others must be recognized, and about the middle of August she joined her friends in Switzerland.

Three weeks were most agreeably spent amidst the grandeur of its Alps, the charm of its lakes, and delightful excursions among the sturdy peasant women and young girls, who, like all young girls, whatever their surroundings, were full of youth's life and pretty coquettishness.

"How fresh you are looking, my dear," Mrs. Sampson said to Esther the morning before their departure, which was the beginning of their journey home.

"I do feel like a new creature," was the reply. "An invisible weight seems to have dropped from me, and left me light and buoyant. I hardly know myself."

"And, now," Mrs. Sampson went on carelessly, "you must act in accordance with the feeling and give us a bit of color in your dress; something soft and cheery as becomes you."

"But I have never worn the regulation mourning costume," Esther demurred. "I do not believe in it."

"Neither do I," Mrs. Sampson declared. "If there is sorrow in the heart it does not need crêpe to make it real; if there is not, black folds will not create it. Besides, perhaps it is a wrong spirit, but to me there is something almost ludicrous in marking off one's grief in this way to the world. At the end of a certain period you announce that you have suddenly jumped from deep dejection into a much milder state of mind. This in turn at the proper time is superseded by a mere suggestion of it; then, finally the world is told that it has wholly disappeared. These things all come, of course; it is right they should; but why so publicly announce the fact? Life is life, and we must allow time to heal the wounds, and let the dead past bury its dead, or it would not go on as it ought. This life is still ours, even if we keep a sacred corner in our hearts for the tears that have been shed, and we must accept all the brightness we can gather from it. Will you, dear, outwardly as well as inwardly? And let us have a little less black and grays and more white and lavender, with occasional tints stolen from those your fingers produce?"

And so it came about that when they were again in

Paris for a few days, a small number of gowns was added to Esther's wardrobe. With their possession returned the blithesome nature; Esther grew to be like the Esther she was, before her whole self was suppressed and grieved.

At last there came a day when the thief of time was squarely met and conquered. The travelers bade the old-world shores a regretful adieu as the steamship glided out on its pathless track for home. The craft was staunch and wholesome, though not so swift and luxurious as the northern and English vessels. This detracted nothing, however, from its enjoyment. Each one felt it a most desirable ending to the year of improvement and pleasure, and each felt richer in every way on account of it.

Not till New Orleans was reached, did they realize the exultation and excitement of being once more at home. No delays now. The swiftly speeding trains were only too slow till the charming goal was reached.

"Here we are," Mr. Sampson joyfully exclaimed, as they alighted from the car one morning in San Francisco. "I am glad I went. I would not have missed it for the world. But I also am thankful it is over and I am here in the good old state once more."

This condition of mind very accurately voiced the feelings of the others. Yet, after so close companionship for many months they were loath to break it.

Miss Brandon immediately started for San José.

"We will go to the hotel for the night with Mrs. Leighton," Mr. Sampson said. "If the Captain is not due for two or three weeks, we will run out to Sacramento and return."

They found a ripple of excitement among their friends and other guests of the Palace Hotel. Several naval officers had arrived the day before on a furlough of a few

weeks, and arrangements were already begun for receptions and other entertainments. A dinner was the program for this evening. Esther found letters awaiting her, one from Ethel requesting her to remain through the winter, as her mother had decided to visit the state soon after New Year's—possibly not till February—and she wished Esther to travel with her. Ethel also wrote that her brother Ned would go later and accompany them home; and she was wise in adding that Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy had been consulted and approved of the plan out of consideration to them, but no power in the world would obtain their consent to give her to any one later than the beginning of summer. Esther replied to the letters, then arranged a part of her effects and slept till night.

When she went down to dinner, Mr. Sampson was waiting for her. He was gayly chatting with an officer in uniform, tall, handsome, of fine military bearing, and affable in manner.

"Mrs. Leighton," Mr. Sampson said, "I wish to present to you my friend, Captain Rodney Martindale."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE powers of the soul which give it growth, maturity, even death, vary in the time and seasons of their sowing and reaping; but if their seedtime and harvest be not a part of Eternal Law, then life is a myth; and if a guiding Hand has led them onward and upward, ever higher and higher, till Love crowns the summit reached, then this must be an integral part of the soul planned in the beginning. The sight of souls, however, is not always clear. Ofttimes it must peer through mists with blindly groping steps, losing the path; and if it discern the heights beyond, the way leading to them is so steep and rough that it sometimes seeks an easier one.

Esther had faltered and halted as she climbed, but at last a new heaven and a new earth had come to her. It was not a new love which she opened her heart to receive. It was the same which she had gone forth to meet in the arbor long ago, when she found a stranger. Now it had come in its own garb and she recognized it.

"Captain Rodney Martindale and Esther Leighton."

The names had come to be joined in the conversation of friends, not flippantly; instead, they were spoken almost reverently, so deep and grave seemed their mutual attraction. A great burst of sunlight had flooded the desolate apartments of Esther's memory, and the breathless scent of death was no more; in its place was a fresh atmosphere, youthful and wholesome and breezy with life.

The days passed rapidly, in this growing interest. Those with the presence of actual companionship were filled to the brim with exhilaration, joy and peace; when one was absent they thrilled with expectancy; while all of them glowed in the vague, fascinating mist of uncertainty.

With Esther, one minor note rang through the harmony, casting a shadow over the brightness. A letter came which had been long on the way. Friends in foreign lands had forwarded it enclosed with notes of their own; strangers had kindly sent it on its way; postmen had obeyed orders; yet she had ever been in advance of it. Now it had come, and there was a mist in the eyes as it was answered, the words written and re-written seemed so somber and cold.

Occasionally a swiftly passing thought of a jewel hidden in a distant home would shadow the view of the happy hour; but the conviction of its never coming to her grew with the days. Besides, a thousand god-stones might now be laid at her feet. One word from a voice she knew would outweigh the test of love from them all.

One evening as a part of its entertainment, the company in the parlors were to recite the whole or a part of a favorite poem. Esther gave Longfellow's "Endymion." The following afternoon an excursion was planned to visit an old, deserted Spanish prison, which made it necessary to be absent from the city for a night.

Captain Martindale and Esther were among the number who improved the opportunity. On arriving at the place, the walls and towers somewhat in ruins reminded the observer of those erected for the security of some haughty baron of the feudal ages. The present picturesque surroundings, however, gave no evidence of a

criminal life or its punishment, but within were deep, gloomy dungeons which called to mind those of the Bastile; and in many respects it resembled an old prison in the East which has been long unused.

A keeper in attendance related the traditions of the manner in which the prisoners were treated. They were summoned by a bell, a piece of which was shown as a relic. Immediately on their appearance, handcuffed and fettered, in readiness to cross the yard to the workshop, soldiers were drawn up in line with orders to fire if any revolt should occur. Within the working rooms, some were secured singly with iron chains, while others were in pairs. When the day's labor was over, they were returned to their cells. These dungeons were more than fifty feet beneath the surface. A trap door led to them, and they were reached by a perpendicular iron ladder. The stones which formed a rude floor in a narrow passage-way at the bottom were made slippery by much humidity, and an occasional overflow from springs.

The pleasure-seekers were both merry and brave, and they were also cautious; so that after due consideration, the descent was safely made into those caverns which must ever be echoing with groans of guilt and entreaties for pardon. The return was not equally propitious, however. All had passed a specially dangerous place except Esther and Captain Martindale, when Esther made a misstep, and at the same time the guide's light went out. For a moment there was despair, then the self-possession of the guide came to his aid.

"The rest of us are all right," he called in a tone which gave courage, "and you are, too, Mrs. Leighton, if you and the Captain will remain perfectly quiet till we can reach the top and I return for you. Can you?"

"We will," was Captain Martindale's ringing reply, as

he held his footing and also Esther. And, there, in that moment of danger, the feeling which had been growing in their hearts found utterance. Rodney repeated a line from Esther's recitation the evening before, "Ye shall be loved again," and their vows were breathed.

Esther thought it all typical of her life. Behind, were the rocks and danger, and it might have been death. But they were passed. She remembered the words thoughtlessly spoken to Aunt Nancy, as they sat under the tree that afternoon. "Away, over beyond the hurricane's breath must be the sunshine." Up, in the distance, she could just see the light. Soon she would be in the midst of it; and the light of her life had come to her.

When Esther was in the mountain cottage, she decorated several large pieces of china, which were left with friends during her absence in Europe. The designs were so unique that they were given special exhibition, and on her return she gave them in aid of an unfortunate fellow-worker. Word now came that their sale had yielded a munificent sum to the fund. Added to this satisfaction, were excellent notices of the press from valued sources. Another piece of work in oil also found its way to the Art Museum. Besides these tributes to her artistic success, Richard wrote, that, to the surprise of all concerned, certain investments were rapidly increasing in value and dividends, and only from choice would she need to form classes in her art as she had intended.

Life had become a garden of bloom, and the choicest had been laid at her feet. The draught of joy they brought was not the bubbling from the intoxicating spring of youth; it came from the well of maturity and experience, deep, clear, and refreshing.

The engagement of Rodney Martindale and Esther was not announced till his return from another three months' cruise. Then a reception in honor of it was given them the evening before Captain Martindale's return to duty; when he should come again, it would be to hasten to the East to claim his bride.

Esther never looked more beautiful than on that night when she stood beside her lover to receive their guests and congratulations.

Late in the evening she slipped out alone on a balcony for a few moments for quiet in her great happiness. In the amber moonlight the world was veiled in a weird, beautiful spirit of youth; for, to her, was not the universe newly created?

Thankfulness was in her heart and smiles on her lips. Her mind, wandering through labyrinths of the past, then emerging into the noontide present, made her humble with its fulness. As she sat so still, she could almost hear the jubilant song within her.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the way. Another moment and a figure stealthily approached her. With a pain which held her heart as in a vise, she looked up to recognize Andrew Mason.

"Mrs. Leighton,—Esther,—I have come at last," he said in a low exultant tone. "And you are here. I feared I might have to cross a continent for you. The boat was late. I have been here only an hour. Almost the first sound I heard was you, singing. How gay they are in the parlors to-night. How homelike it seems to be here again—and with you."

Esther was silent. Mr. Mason had paused near her, and was looking down in wonder at the white face up-turned to his.

"Have you no welcome for me?" he asked.

"You must not touch me," she exclaimed in a husky voice, instinctively rising and shrinking from him as he would have taken her hand in greeting.

"But I have brought the jewel," he said, smiling, and approaching nearer her. "The jewel which was to be the proof of my love for you."

He held up the glittering gem which flashed in the moonlight like veiled stars.

"It is the god-stone which was promised in return for you and your love," he again repeated.

"In return for me? For my love?" The words were a cry for help, while her eyes were searching for things not seen.

"Do you not remember that twilight among the ruins by the great blue sea?" he implored.

"Yes, I remember."

"Have you forgotten your promise?"

"No, I have not forgotten."

"This was the pledge," he went on earnestly, "that when I brought you this gem you would be mine."

"Yes," Esther mechanically murmured. "It is a beauty. The azure of the precious stone is a tint of Nature's wonderful coloring. It is a rare, rare stone; a sacred stone with you. This was to win myself," she almost sobbed in despair. "But I did not promise my love. How could I? I told you I did not love you."

"You are still coy," he half whispered, with eyes, smiling, persuasive, confident, looking steadily into hers. "You are reluctant as you were that night. Sit down, please. You are trembling. We are secure here."

"No, I will not sit down. No, you must not touch my hand, not yet. And listen," she hurried on with stifled breath. "I never believed you would come. I

did not know what I said ; something unusual seemed to hold me in its grasp, and make me untrue to myself. I had suffered so much," she pleaded with clasped hands, bending toward him in her eagerness, like an exquisite flower bowed with the gale. "Once I went out to meet my love and did not find him. The disappointment, the cruel words, and the loneliness, had taken the life from my heart. It lay in a swoon. Its unconsciousness made me untrue to myself that night, and through this I was false to you. And never have I believed you could, or would, secure the jewel. You have come. It is here. But—I cannot keep my promise."

"Have you still no faith?" he entreated. "Hear me. I have suffered much. Once I was imprisoned and escaped. The disguise I always wore saved me. I endured cold and hunger. Death followed my every step. Would a man risk so much for anything but the love of a woman?"

She bowed her head, and for a moment there was silence.

"Esther !"

Slowly she raised her eyes.

"Have you no word for me?"

"Do you know what it is to have a soul imprisoned?" she cried. "A starved soul fluttering in vain against the bars which hold it captive?" Her voice was low but tremulous in its strength. "I know," she moaned. "Never again shall mine suffer the desolation. No, not if you strike me dead. It is you, too, whom I would save from this despair. I could never make you happy."

"Captive?" he repeated almost joyously, ignoring the last of her appeal. "You shall be as free as a bird, my peerless beauty. Come——"

"Can you not understand?" she interrupted, stepping

farther away. "You cannot cheat the soul. I tried it. You cannot do it. You may make it insensible with indifference or despair, but the stupor passes away. You may lull it into a little slumber with soft, rippling notes, singing a pathway fairer than any you see stretching before you; yet, when the song is ended the awakening comes, and then it is like a crouching lion waiting to spring forth in all its strength to demand its own. The awakening has come to me."

"What do you mean?" he asked fiercely, standing before her with folded arms, a vision of implacable justice.

"Do you not know?" A note of sweet but melancholy music vibrated through the words, while a glow from memory brightened her face with the consciousness of power. "I have learned what love is. I am the betrothed of another," she whispered.

From a distance music and laughter floated out to them.

"It is in honor of our plighted vows," she breathed.

"*You* the promised bride of another?" he exclaimed. "It shall never be. By every heathen god I will go and denounce you before them all."

"You have forsaken heathen gods. An oath to them is vain and you will not do the thing you swear." The words were a prayer. In her humility there could be neither haughtiness nor anger.

"I will do it."

"Then it is not love," Esther softly replied. "You have not learned its language. Could I harm what I love?"

"You beautiful, treacherous siren," he frowned. "You arouse every evil passion there is in a man's heart. Yet I must suffer and be silent. I must endure all the wrong. No, by the gods."

"Forget me!" she pleaded. "If you suffer, my heart

weeps for you. It never could love you. Can you not see I am true to you? I cannot do otherwise, not if I were to die. And now may I leave you? I hear my name. They are calling me."

"Yes, go. You shall return to your lover once more, unharmed. But not unless you wear this jewel—this proof of my love and of your promise. They shall see it glittering on your bosom. It is yours. To-morrow I will say to them, 'Here is the symbol of virtue, goodness, truth, sincerity. This is a sacred stone. There is none like it in your country. I secured it at the risk of my life as a proof of my love. The woman who wears it promised to be my wife when I should come with it.' Could you deny these things?"

"I cannot wear it," Esther begged.

"Wear it or I follow you to-night."

Speechless she fastened the jewel in her laces.

"Esther!" a voice called not far away.

At the word her face brightened with a sudden glow.

"I am coming," she answered, as she hastily joined Rodney Martindale.

"Where have you been?" Rodney asked. "I have looked everywhere for you."

"Was it so long?" she said wearily. "It seems a long time since I was with you."

"You are shivering," Rodney went on anxiously, gathering the long soft wrap more closely about her. "Are you cold, sweetheart? And what makes you so white? Where are the roses?"

"Yes, I am cold," Esther answered. "It was a thought which made me shiver and grow pale—the thought that I might lose you."

He gathered her in his arms, smiling down into the impassioned face.

*"Her eye in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright,
That birds would sing and think it were not night,"*

he quoted, "but the eye is veiled in mist just now."

"Kiss me once more, Rodney."

"A thousand times, sweetheart," he replied with a caress. "Are you sad in your great happiness?" he questioned. "It is a great happiness, is it not, Esther?" he entreated, folding her closer in his arms.

"It is like heaven," she murmured, trembling at the thought of losing it. "It is heaven."

He kissed her on brow and cheek and lip.

"You are beautiful to-night, Esther," he fondly smiled, putting her away from him that he might look at her. "But it is *you* I love. It is only some one on the balcony," he added, as Esther looked around, startled. "And we must return to the parlors now."

As they stood a little apart from a group, listening to the lively chatter, Esther's wrap slipped from her shoulders and revealed the strange, flashing gem on her bosom.

Rodney's eyes questioned in surprise.

"It is a gift in honor of our betrothal," she whispered. "Did you ever see so lovely a blue in a stone?"

"Do you disclose the giver's name?" Rodney asked.

"It is a secret to-night," she laughed. "To-morrow you will know."

"It is wondrously beautiful and unique," Rodney went on admiringly, "so unlike anything I ever saw."

"There is none other like it in all the country," she affirmed. "It has a marvelous history which you will know to-morrow."

"Well, the color has returned to your face," he rejoiced. "I did not like to see you so pale."

Then they were interrupted, and the evening sped swiftly away.

Every moment there was a pain in Esther's heart, because there was one less of life to live; for she thought, "When he goes it will no longer be life; simply existence."

At last the lights were out, except a gleam here and there in private rooms, and voices were low or altogether still.

Esther was among the last to retire to her rooms. She entered the private parlor and hastily unfastened the jewel, whose beauty chilled her heart like serpents' fangs, laying it for a moment on a table, forgetting that the window draperies were not down, and the sash was raised.

While she stood gazing at the gem, a servant brought a request from a friend who was ill. Esther responded, and when she returned after a few moments' absence, the glittering thing was gone.

She ran to the window, listened, looked up and down the balcony, but she heard no sound. Quietly, without disclosing her reasons, she learned that no stranger had been seen in the halls.

"It has been stolen," she groaned. "He will never believe it. He will think I have done this purposely. Now there is no mercy for me. He will have none now. Ah, that I might die!" she prayed, looking out into the clear, bright night, but seeing none of its charm. "Death must be sweet. Whatever one may do or say to grieve, the silent sleeper can never know. It can never cause a pain or tear. There is only rest. If the grim friend had only come for me an hour ago, silent, unheralded, when the

tide of life was full, swift, oblivion would have held no sorrow for the loss he brought. But now!"

In her great trouble she thought there was only one thing to do. Quickly she closed the window and drew the curtains. Then she summoned a maid. Trunks were hastily packed, and preparations made for her departure, while the little world within the house still slept.

When all was ready, with heart and fingers numb, she took her paper and pen and tried to write.

"Rodney, my love," she began with fast falling tears.

"Oh, God!" she cried, "can I ever do this and live? I must. There is one thing worse than this—to have you, Rodney, leave me in scorn; to see you going farther and farther away, and I could not call you back. Ah, but there is another thought whose sharp pain is tenfold deeper,—to have one doubt of me in your heart. But this I must bear."

She threw aside the sheet blotted with her tears, and reached for another.

"Dear Rodney," she began again, "I am leaving you, leaving you forever. Death were far sweeter. They will tell you I was false to you. I am true; true to you, to another, and to myself. But can I lay bare my soul so plainly that others may rightly read? No. Each interprets according to its own language and none would understand; not even you, Rodney, so strong and upright, who led me up out of the valley of doubt, of fear and despair, into light and life; not even you; because souls have so many shades of feeling. Their colorings are tinted from so many lights; and so I leave you. But when far away, may the unbeliefs grieving you sometimes be thrust aside, for a moment allowing me to rest in your thoughts as true and sweet as at this moment.

"Yet, as the torrent pours over me, as I wrestle alone

with the deep waters, I send a song of praise to Heaven that never again will faith be lost. With bowed head and bent knee, I rejoice that this knowledge will ever abide with me, to bud and bloom for whatever may be good. And now, Rodney, farewell."

NOTE.—Mr. George Walter Vincent Smith, who owns one of the largest and most varied collections of jade in the country, has in the Art Museum at Springfield, Mass., a piece resembling Esther's, except the coloring is green instead of "Heaven's own blue." Esther's jewel was the first piece brought to this country. It is now in the possession of a New England family.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Esther left the hotel, only one feeling was dominant—to go away, without thought whither the path should lead. But when she found herself at the railroad station, the problem demanded solution.

After a hasty, bewildered study of the cause of events, she thought of the secluded mountain cottage. She half smiled over the glad surprise of Clarence and Jane at having her with them once more, and at their own satisfaction in their quiet lives. And, after all, were they not to be envied? If any romance had ever come to them—and few are without it—it was passed. Life was peaceful, and to them it was not monotonous, even in what seemed to others a lonely home.

The weekly stipend added to their savings furnished an ever present joy. Their little circle of neighboring friends was their world; they had neither longings nor ambition for a different one. They did not possess the capacity for either great joy or sorrow, but they were happy.

Esther was honest with herself. With all her beauty, talent, wealth, her responsive soul, to whom of the three had life given the most? What more could one ask than happiness and content?

Then she remembered other greetings would await her.

The deep voice from out the grandeur of the mountains would speak; yet, with no congenial, human soul to share the awe of its eloquence, it would be painful. Loneliness

would meet her with outstretched arms, to burden her with its lavish hospitality; while memory would ever sing,

*"Love, then, had hope of richer store;
What end is here to my complaint?
This haunting whisper makes me faint,
'More years had made me love thee more.'"*

The clock pointed to the hour when a train would start her thither if she chose. Mechanically she bought a ticket and entered a car just as it began to move. She bowed her head that she might shut out the sight of all the loved places, as she would try to shut them out of her heart.

This decision of Esther's destination was like a pebble thrown into a pool, in that its ripples widened and touched other lives; unlike it, in that instead of ever going on they turned and reacted on the starting-point, herself.

"I do not understand it at all," Mrs. Parkman mused, when the news came.

They were all in the library after breakfast, and an open letter lay on the table.

"Esther's disappointment in being utterly unable to meet me in San Francisco cannot for a moment be doubted," Mrs. Parkman declared, "but I cannot understand why she says it is imperative that she remain in the mountains all summer."

"When was the letter dated?" the Doctor asked.

"It was begun February 27," was the reply. Mrs. Parkman again examined the date that she might be correct. "And it was finished the 29th."

"The 27th," Richard repeated thoughtfully. "What was the date of the one received a day or two ago?"

Ethel opened the writing desk and handed the note to her mother.

"It was written the morning of the 26th," Mrs. Parkman said. "That evening the reception was held in honor of her engagement to Captain Martindale. She expressed a strong wish we might be there, and says our absence is the only regret. She was very happy when she wrote these few lines. Hear one of her thoughts:—

" 'I have had many days heavy with life's burdens. Things went amiss with me. But a light came into the dark abyss of my soul, and shining through the tears gave the promised bow of rest and peace. All is sparkling, life-giving sunshine.' "

"When Esther is happy she is so supremely happy," Ethel said, "and I suppose the opposite is equally true. She has a finely touched spirit. But it is certainly strange she could not take time to merely mention the important evening. And not a word about Captain Martindale, either. She simply announces her departure on account of reasons beyond her control."

"I shall not start for California at present, Ned," the mother asserted. "Why can you not go with me later? In May, perhaps?"

"I cannot find the time."

"But you have never taken a vacation. You begin to look tired and a bit worn. Have you had more of those perplexing cases than usual the past year; and of which you never tell us?"

"Yes, Mother, I have. One very trying one," he added, thinking how little any one knew of the nature of it. Once or twice, however, he had half believed Richard suspected his love for Esther.

"Now," Richard began in one of his decisive tones, "let me moralize a little. Time stands at your elbow as long

as you breathe. If, as Uncle Eben says, 'you take holt of it hard and hang on tight and not be a mite skeered you've got it, sure. It owns itself conquered. But if you tech it careful, kinder afraid, it springs away, and you can't catch it more'n you could a flea. You never git it.' Now, Ned, you just ararnge for a year's vacation——"

"Ah! not so long as that," the Doctor interrupted.

"Well, as near as possible, then," Richard agreed. "Be ready to start in May and remain till the holidays. Go with Mrs. Parkman to California, and while she remains in San Francisco and thereabouts with her old friend, Mrs. Danvers, you roam over the mountains, and examine the mines, and study all the problems you are so fond of. Anything will be a change. Then of course you will both find Esther in her mountain fastnesses and bring her home with you. That must be done. She must return with you."

"Please give me the date of the first letter again," the Doctor replied.

"The morning of the 26th," Ethel answered.

"I will consider the matter," the Doctor promised, "though I do not quite see how it can be brought about."

However, after a week's study the seeming impossibilities were removed, and the date in May was fixed upon.

A few days before their departure, Richard went up to assure Uncle Eben that the travelers would surely bring Esther home with them.

"You tell her," Uncle Eben said, "that young lives are so full of energy and joy that they forget the old die of tears."

"I wish Esther had never seen Robert Leighton," Aunt Nancy spoke up with spirit. "If you had listened more to what Hiram Foss said, and if you hadn't heard that rascal pretendin' to pray, and if——"

"And if Esther never'd ben born," Uncle Eben broke in, "nor Robert Leighton nuther. While you're if-fin', Ma, you may as well go on, clean down to the beginnin'; if God had never made man at all, nor the universe—if there'd never ben any God—there's no end to ifs,—Nancy, when yer go backwards; and there's plenty on em' lyin' all along the future road. The only way to do is to plow yer way through 'em the best you can, rememberin' there will come a time when they, too, will no longer pester."

"Don't get to preachin', Eben," Aunt Nancy begged, "We won't find time for that now, because you go on to twentiethly. Richard has to go right back to-day and we must send Esther some homemade goodies, jell and marmalade and such things."

In accordance with Aunt Nancy's wishes, Richard returned with a valise full of the fruits of her labor, and also a memory still more closely packed with messages from the two, who so ardently but quietly longed for Esther's return.

During all the preparations, and the journey to San Francisco, one spark of hope lived in Neidhurd Parkman's thoughts,—that Esther might yet be his. But if this could not be, his deep love for her prompted the wish to aid her if she were in trouble. He loved her too well to see her unhappy, and he knew some great change must have suddenly come into her life; he feared it was for ill.

Of late, Mrs. Parkman had been worried over the matter, and when they arrived in San Francisco they decided not to go to the Palace Hotel, but to engage rooms in the house with Mrs. Danvers.

As soon as they were nicely settled, Mrs. Parkman wrote to Mrs. Sampson who promptly replied in person.

"I can give you no information whatever," she said, "in regard to Mrs. Leighton's sudden disappearance from the hotel. We were not present at the reception, and Captain Martindale left the city immediately, within a few hours after receiving a note which she left for him. He told us this much, some days later, when Mr. Sampson accidentally met him in San José. He expected his ship to leave the day after the entertainment, but when he reported for duty he found there would be a little delay. He could not remain here, however. He also said, that it was all a mystery to him, but his faith in Esther remained unshaken; that the explanation must come sometime. He would immediately have sought her but she left not a trace of her destination. None of her friends here know where she is."

When Mrs. Parkman informed Mrs. Sampson where Esther was staying, she was surprised at the distance and the tediousness of a part of the journey.

"We were both intending to go to her," she explained, "and insist on her coming here, then, accompanying us home. But, Ned, I hardly feel able to undertake the journey. You will have to bring her to me. I will remain here, and you need not hasten. Esther is well, apparently. You can roam around the mountains, and mines at pleasure, only have the way always lead toward one point."

And so it was decided, after much consideration of the matter, but the decision was not made known to Esther.

Consequently she did not recognize a horseman, approaching her home several weeks later, as she sat one evening in the twilight under a favorite tree, thinking of the past, and wondering if she would ever see her dearest friends again. But before she could enter the house, as was her custom on the approach of strangers, he had ad-

vanced nearer, as if to ask the way, the road having been extended. A look of surprise, an exclamation of joy, and he sprang from his horse, going to meet her with outstretched hands.

"Is it possible, Mrs. Leighton—Esther—that I have found you at last," Dr. Parkman gravely said, unable to read his welcome in the astonished eyes searching his.

Esther could not reply for a moment; then she said, the old glad light brightening her face, "I am so glad to see you. But how do you happen to be in this part of the country? And how did you find me?"

"I almost began to despair of finding you," was the answer. "I had nothing but your post-office address to guide me; I suppose that is the little hamlet of which you wrote us when here before. Twice I was sent in the wrong direction, and was obliged to retrace my steps; in consequence I was delayed a whole week. But here I am," he went on with assumed gayety, "a delegate from our combined family to storm the castle and carry you off as captive. You have been a prisoner here too long. Are you so fond of the place?"

"Please give me time to answer both your assertions and question," Esther smiled. Then calling Clarence to relieve Dr. Parkman of the care of his horse, she led the way into the house, stopping at the door to give Jane new orders for supper.

When the meal was over, the lamps lighted, and they were talking over familiar places and incidents in the lives of those so dear to her, Esther thought it was like the old life returned, with the dreadful chasm which had separated it from her, and in which so much of herself had been buried, for the moment gone from memory. Only once did she refer to her former life in the cottage.

"Solitude is so foreign to your nature," Dr. Parkman

said, "that your stay here must have been a great self-sacrifice, even with a sense of duty to smooth the way."

"There is no loneliness so utterly dreary as the close, constant companionship of uncongeniality," was the reply. "It can neither rejoice nor grieve with you, nor sympathize with one's longings or growth either in integrity, love, or culture. When the keynotes of souls are struck in such different measures and intervals there must be discord."

"You have not been idle," Dr. Parkman said, glancing at her easel. "Work is often a faithful friend."

"Under certain circumstances," Esther replied. "When one has the motive for inspiration,

*"To do worthy the writing, and to write
Worthy the reading and the world's delight,"*

then the work would be both pleasing and beneficial; but to work simply to forget trouble or live through the days, then it is neither."

"There are always those around us whom we can help; that brings its reward in our happiness as well as theirs."

"Yes," Esther thoughtfully responded, "I am trying to learn the lesson, and I think I make a little progress; but it is hard to always repress one's self for others, to always see so much success in other lives, so much worth living for, and still remain sweet and gracious over so little in one's own of that which they care for most. The lesson has to be learned slowly. All are not constituted so that chastisement develops the best in one's nature."

Esther was sitting on a divan, one hand lightly resting on a cushion, the other carelessly holding some photographs of the mountains which they had been admiring.

As she finished the sentence Dr. Parkman abruptly

rose, paced the floor once or twice, looked out of the window, then hesitatingly turned to her.

"Esther," he said, "I cannot know whether I bring good or ill tidings, but I must tell you. First, I will restore to you a valuable jewel," and he laid the god-stone before her.

Esther recoiled as if cut by a lash.

"It is yours. At least I was told so."

"Yes, it—once—I—yes, it was thrust upon me. I do not want it. I cannot take it."

It seemed to her the eyes of a thousand demons shot their baleful glances in the brilliant gleams.

"It has a history," Dr. Parkman began.

"Yes, I know its history," Esther interrupted nervously. "I think it is ruled by evil spirits to cast a malignant shadow over every life connected with it. I cannot take it. I would not have it. I never will bind my poor weary soul again, now I know what freedom is. I did not think, I did not know—I may have been influenced"—she added in a husky voice, "but——"

She stopped speaking and gazed at the beautiful, sparkling gem. As the memory of the great love of Rodney Martindale on that eventful night stirred within her, the face softened, the eyes grew moist and dreamy, the lips parted in smiles; then as the mind went on to the end, utter despair drove away the happy thought, and with a great sadness she turned to Dr. Parkman and tremblingly asked, "Where did you find it?"

"I was riding through the mountains on my way here," the Doctor returned. "I have stopped at various places on the way, and when I could, I have visited different mining camps. We felt assured you were well and I found the healthful air of the mountains very beneficial. One night in an out of the way place,

I was hastily awakened by a man knocking at my cabin door, who wished me to visit a workman who was believed to be dying. The miners had learned I was a physician. I immediately complied with the request. I found the sufferer could live but a short time, hardly an hour. I did what I could for him. I quickly discerned him to be far superior to his comrades and surroundings. He was refined, educated, and courteous. But a strange yearning in the eyes told of an unexpressed wish.

"'Am I dying?' he said to me.

"I could only tell him the truth.

"'I have a confession to make,' he hoarsely whispered.

"I requested the men to leave us alone.

"Then he told his story. How he was of high birth in his native land, that he had studied in Europe, but had remained loyal to his own country.

"He said that a year ago his cousin, who had been made an exile on account of progressive views, and whom he heard was known in America as Andrew Mason, secretly returned to his own land and robbed him of a jewel, a sacred emblem; that he, himself, was in London at the time; that orders were immediately sent him to hasten to America, as his cousin had sailed for San Francisco, to find him, and to regain the gem. He took a steamer within ten hours, landed in New York in seven days, crossed the continent, and reached the Pacific coast first.

"When his cousin's boat reached San Francisco, he saw this Mr. Mason, so called, leave the steamer. He followed him to the Palace Hotel. He watched his chance, hid in his room, and when Mr. Mason entered for the night he sprang upon him and demanded the god-stone, as he called it," Dr. Parkman explained.

"Mr. Mason declared he did not have it. The cousin did not believe him and threatened to murder him if he refused. They fought, one for his life, the other for the jewel. The cousin in his wrath took a dagger and plunged it into the man's heart; but he did not find the jewel. Fearing he would be arrested, he sprang out of the window and ran along the balcony—you remember there are balconies going around all the stories, overlooking the inner court of that wondrous hotel. As he passed a brilliantly lighted room, he saw through a raised window a beautiful woman pass out into the hall. Then his eye caught sight of his treasure lying on her bureau. Quick as a flash he stepped within, secured it, with the picture of the woman he had seen—made his escape, and succeeded in reaching the ground safely.

"When sober sense came to him, he reflected that he dared not return to China, fearing lest he should be accused of the murder of his kinsman, and have to suffer tortures or be beheaded. He could not send back the jewel, as it had been dishonored by being taken from the country,—a religious superstition. When he found he could not live, he thought it right that it should be returned to the woman from whom he had stolen it. He gave it to me with her picture. I looked, and it was—you. Strange that I should have been his father-confessor."

During the recital, Esther felt the blood freeze in her heart. Through it all she could not speak, only listen. At the close, in a voice she hardly recognized as her own, she said, "I do not want it. I cannot take it."

"But it is yours," Dr. Parkman urged. "It is yours by right, is it not?"

"No—yes—it was thrust upon me. Once, once—no,

—I refused it. Yes, it was obtained for me.” Then, with a swift look of wonder sweeping over her face she asked,

“Do you know when Mr. Mason was killed? Did the cousin give you any dates?” The parched lips could scarcely move.

“Yes,” was the reply, “it was the night of the 26th of February, or rather the early morning of the 27th, between 12 and 1 o’clock. I questioned him particularly in regard to the date and the hour.”

At the words, Esther slowly sank down among the cushions, unmindful of time or place.

“Oh, my God, my God!” she murmured between the dry sobs; the tears would not come; they were dried in the furnace of intense emotion. “Oh, Rodney, Rodney! what have you thought of me?”

Neidhurd Parkman trembled with the strength of passion; but, alas! At this moment of supreme agony, though he would have taken her in his arms, and kissed away and soothed all the burning sorrow of that heart, no matter what it might be, he realized there was only one earthly being who could comfort her. With a pain cutting his own heart in twain, and a piteous terror of his helplessness, he knew the kindest thing he could do would be to leave her alone with her grief; and yet, this was the hardest of all to bear—an intolerable ache added to his own wound; but he went softly out and closed the door behind him.

The moments passed into hours. Then Esther rose. Her face shone with the illumination of glory attained from unseen heights; in her heart she had welcomed resignation as an abiding guest; she could only endure to the end.

Calmly she sat down to her desk. One, two, three

pages, were written with steady hand. She folded them, and wrote, thereon,

"The story of the god-stone."

She placed them in an envelope and the address was simply,

Captain Rodney Martindale,

U. S. Navy.

When all was finished, she threw a wrap about her and passed out into the early morning. She heeded neither its freshness nor the beauty which heralded it. With clasped hands and faltering steps, she slowly passed around the mountain curve and knelt beside a mound.

Robert had asked forgiveness. Which one of them ought to be responsible for so much that had followed? The searchlight of clear reasoning showed Esther that Robert's influence once had crushed out all faith and hope in her nature. Ought she to have been such a tower of strength as to be impregnable? Ought her spiritual nature to have remained so healthful in spite of all as to resist the subtle poison in the atmosphere created in her heart? With her hot cheek resting on the cool ground she wrestled with burdens laid upon her till sleep came to soothe and strengthen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEN, after breakfast Esther and Dr. Parkman were looking over some newspapers he had brought, they read to little purpose. The mind of each was filled with troublous thoughts.

In the chain of circumstances which Esther was studying, the letter that had followed her so long, and which did not reach her till sometime after her return to San Francisco, formed an important link. The missive was from Dr. Parkman. It was not a declaration of love, rather a prelude to that. It breathed a subtle sympathy for all the circumstances of her life, and an interest in everything pertaining to her own ultimate happiness, which were as rare as they were beautiful. So delicate was its whole tenor, that it gave the impression of self being wholly forgotten in its generosity for the recipient. The passion of the writer was gently waiting to learn if it would be welcome, or in danger of losing him a friend—for it was too strong willingly to risk such a necessity; he could not lose all interest in her.

When Esther recalled the lines, the great heart speaking through them was more and more clearly understood. Until now she had not yet fully read their depth. Yet, before a thought of love for Neidhurd Parkman had ever entered her own heart, she well remembered how she often declared she should envy the girl who would become Dr. Parkman's wife, so noble, and tender, and

true, he was. She knew if those few pages had come to her when they ought to have come, the brilliant, beautifully colored thing lying hidden in the darkest recess of her desk, would never have left its native land. Surrounded by such an atmosphere as the letter breathed which might grow into love, life would have worn a different coloring, and the one word that night by the sea would not have been spoken, though even now, she could truthfully say that she never believed aught would result from it. She had also been told that only once could the best be brought out of a woman's heart. How many hearts there were that never yielded their richest inheritance, because the sympathetic wooer who could call it forth never came, or came to find his place usurped, she did not know; yet, things must often go peacefully on under these conditions, and there must be many who go through life without learning this truth. Now, she realized that it was Rodney Martindale, to whom her soul had given its full response. Could Neidhurd Parkman also have borne the magic wand?

As Neidhurd Parkman turned the pages he saw not the words. He ever heard the cry, "Oh, Rodney, Rodney! What have you thought of me?" a cry so deep in anguish and so spontaneous, that she who uttered it never knew it escaped her. He well understood that Esther's first, real love was not won by Robert Leighton, but by Rodney Martindale. And yet—if it should come to pass—he would rather have her love even now, than the first flush from any heart he ever knew, so rich it would be. He would rather have the right to leave a kiss on her dead forehead than on any living lips he had ever seen. For him she was first, last, always.

But neither revealed the workings of the mind.

Instead, Esther said, "Dr. Parkman, I will go to your

mother as soon as possible, and we will start for home at her pleasure. Naturally, I cannot leave in a day, perhaps not for a week. There are a few things to be attended to. And——" she hesitated.

"Is there anything you would like me to do, Esther?" Dr. Parkman asked, dropping the paper and looking into her wistful eyes. "What kind of a friend is he who is not a friend in need?"

A friend! A great joy swept across Esther's face. He was her friend; nothing more. He saw the gladness and he would not add one word to grieve her. He loved her too well. She, a girl in years, had had enough of trouble.

"Is there anything you would like, Esther?" he repeated.

Unconscious of the significance of the act, she arose, and drew from her desk the letter written in the early morning hours.

"You intend to remain on the Pacific a few months, I believe," she said falteringly.

"Yes, Esther, possibly until November."

"Then I trust this to you, my truest friend. If ever you should see the one to whom it is addressed, or learn where he is, I ask you to deliver it safely." She handed him the letter which had cost her so much to write. "Are you positive the cousin told you the wicked deed was committed between the hours of twelve and one?" she asked.

"I am quite positive, Esther. I even jotted it down so as not to forget."

"And I did not leave the hotel until four," Esther thought. "Oh, God! It was already done. It was not I who caused it. Oh, no, no, I never thought of crime." She grew deadly white, but controlling herself, said,

"You will remain with us a few days, Doctor?"

"I was obliged to promise to carry you away captive, but as you are going of your own free will, Esther, my services are not necessary. Unless——," he hesitated. Would it be possible to stay and keep silence?

"No, there is nothing I cannot do, and I know the way," Esther smiled sadly.

"Then I will not tarry here, but meet you and mother in San Francisco. You will probably not leave there till September."

Esther had occasionally been able to secure papers from San Francisco. In one she read that Captain Rodney Martindale was considering an offer to go to foreign lands. That was all she knew. But, that afternoon, as she watched Neidhurd Parkman carefully wend his way down the mountain path, she felt that she rested in the shelter of his strength; that yet all must be well, so great was her faith in his ability to remove mountains.

When about to sunder the ties of her strange home Esther found a few links bound her to the lonesome place. The mountains had been her companions in solitude and she could never forget their unexpressed language. They were there, before the chime of the ages, love, had struck the chord of its prelude.

The youth and children in the hamlet were quite inconsolable when they learned of her intended departure. And, when, after a day's absence she found Jane and Clarence in tears, she realized how great had been their assistance.

"We shall be so lonesome, Mrs. Leighton," Jane said.

"You will miss me for awhile," Esther replied, "then other ties and interests will take my place. I have given the little cottage to you and Clarence. It is not valuable, but will make you a home. There is one stipulation,

that you care for the little spot around the mountain curve. Here is the deed. I shall never return to the mountains."

When, after a few delays, Esther joined Mrs. Parkman and Mrs. Danvers, she found an invitation for them all to spend two weeks with Mrs. Sampson in Sacramento; and before these were ended, they could not refuse a week with Miss Brandon in San José. No one questioned Esther, and no one knew whither Captain Martindale had gone. The visits with the old friends and in the old places had more pain than pleasure for her, and she was only too glad when the day for starting homeward at last arrived. Dr. Parkman returned the day before, in time to see to tickets and start them on the way.

"I do not like to leave you, Ned," his mother said with a tremble in her voice, when they were saying good-bys. "Do you think you need to remain till December? Suppose we set the time at November."

"I really think, mother, that is as long as I can be away, and the days will soon pass."

The journey East was not without incidents of interest. When they passed through one of the deep cañons, where up, up, almost as far as the eye can see, a bit of sunshine welcomes you, Esther thought it was something for which to live; and yet, she reflected, that with all its grandeur and expression of wonderful power, it was eclipsed by one flash from a man's brain.

On the summit of the Rockies, she found an example of sturdy New England thrift and stability, in the person of a comely woman who delighted travelers with her delicious lunches, thus enabling her fatherless sons to get a start in the world; the woman was content. Esther puzzled over the problem, "Who is responsible for the composite nature of every human being?"

At Chicago, Richard and Cecil pleasantly surprised the travelers with their company the remainder of the journey. Cecil had grown into a fine, manly lad, and wondered why the beautiful lady became so interested in him. They were soon confidential friends.

"He has the bright intellect of his Grandmother Leighton," Richard said privately, "and the promise of the staunch integrity of his Grandfather. We will hope for the best."

Before New York was reached, it was decided that Richard should adopt the child; that his name should be neither Cecil Leighton, nor Cecil Tyler, but Cecil Benson; and Esther should furnish the means for his education.

The property not dishonestly used by Robert Leighton had fortunately greatly increased in value, so that this, with the amount returned at the silent house in the mountains, enabled her to carry out many wishes.

It had also been arranged that she should divide the winter between her friends in New York and Eaton; just now, she decided to give Ethel two nights, then visit her old home.

A notice to this effect was mailed as soon as they arrived in the city, and it happened to be addressed by Ethel to Aunt Nancy. Aunt Nancy seldom received a letter, their few correspondents usually sending their missives in Uncle Eben's name. When Uncle Eben handed it to her on his return from the office, one noon, she was quite amazed.

"Who can it be from?" she wondered, putting on her spectacles. "That don't look like Esther's writing, and still it does some. I can't tell where it was mailed. It ain't plain a bit. I wonder, now."

"Why don't you open it and find out?" impatient Uncle Eben suggested. "Yer can't read the inside on the cover."

Thus advised, Aunt Nancy broke the seal, and her face was soon all smiles.

"It is from Esther," she exclaimed, reading. "She is comin' to-morrow. Just read for yourself, Pa. It is very sweet and contrite."

After the note had been read and re-read, laughed and cried over, and discussed, Aunt Nancy's energetic nature began to assert itself, ready for the fray.

"Now, Pa," she began animatedly, "you run right out and get an early squash for a pie; Esther's dreadful fond of 'em; and she says Richard will come with her, and he sends word they will drive over from Hillster, and to wait my good dinner for 'em. They'll be here at two. Richard likes baked chicken, I remember; you kill two of 'em, Eben. I sort o' guess Massachusetts won't take second seat to Californy in cookin', while Nancy Hathaway's livin'. Then, there's Esther's room to fix up, and you slick up the barn, and——"

"Look here, Ma," Uncle Eben leisurely smiled, exuberant at being for once the philosopher. "You jest take some o' yer own doctrine. Don't talk so fast; set down and think it over; then calmly do one thing at a time; don't get in sech a flutter."

Aunt Nancy laughed as she listened to her own words.

"Well, we'll have to stir, any way," she maintained, "and you run right down and get Mis' Foss to help through to-morrow; yes, more than that. Now, step spry."

"Nancy's just as queer a critter as any body when she gets excited," Uncle Eben soliloquized, as he turned around. "Jest as hilarity."

In reality, there were so many things each wanted done,

that the time slipped away quite rapidly enough. Everything was not to the satisfaction of both till 12 o'clock of the eventful day had arrived.

At 1, Uncle Eben was ready to receive his guests. "I'm goin' out on the steps to watch," he announced. "They may get in early."

Aunt Nancy saw that the chickens were done to a dot, and that everything could be trusted to Mrs. Foss, then she changed her dress and went on the piazza.

Minutes were long.

"I've a mind to step down and meet 'em," Uncle Eben cautiously mentioned. "I feel kinder sprightly."

"You jest set still, Eben Hathaway, and let patience do its perfect work," Aunt Nancy replied. "It can't be long now, to wait."

Aunt Nancy was right. But when the carriage drove up to the door, and Richard called, "Here we are, Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy," then jumped out and assisted Esther to alight, and Aunt Nancy was kissing her, Uncle Eben's sprightliness seemed to have entirely deserted him. Esther had come home! He could only place his hand on her head in blessing, bow his own, and silently give thanks. Then, fumbling for his handkerchief he explained as he led the way into the house,

"My old eyes are gettin' so pesky weak they're dreadful watery."

Richard determined that, at least on this day, their home-coming should not have a pathetic side; beside, the pathos of it was too deep to come immediately to the surface; so that his cheery manner soon had got all tongues in use at once, and all hearts laughing together, while Aunt Nancy, greatly perturbed lest the dinner spoil, hustled the family down to a table worthy the compliment of a prince.

When the dessert was reached and Esther saw Uncle Eben's wry face as he wrestled with a piece of huckleberry pie, she asked, "Is it too sour, Uncle? Do you not like it?"

"It's sweet enough," Uncle Eben replied with downcast eyes. "Yes, Esther, I like it. Fine flavor. Very fine." Then he muttered under his breath, "It's the dum associations that choke me. Pesky work to get them down."

Now, jams and jellies and other sweetmeats, had reminiscences of only festive days, in Uncle Eben's mind. Of course, he reasoned, this was a great day; there could never be a happier one; and Aunt Nancy had the "good-ies"; but, as he enjoyed them, an idea suddenly leaped into his mind; an idea so full of beauty to the dear old soul, that his face shone with its reflection.

Through all the afternoon's chatting, with its innumerable questions and answers and plans, he hugged it close within his own breast, occasionally smiling with complacent air, when a suggestion was made which would interfere with it.

Not till Richard started for the late evening train, Uncle Eben having followed him into the yard, did the elated man take any one into his confidence. Richard laughed and nodded, and Uncle Eben winked and blinked, as the two plotted and planned, while Aunt Nancy now and then took a peep out of the window, and wondered what "mischief those boys were up to at such a time o' day."

A solemn benediction seemed to fall on the little group as they separated for the night.

"We are rich, Ma," Uncle Eben said as he took his light to retire. "We are rich in having two such good children as Richard and Esther," to which Aunt Nancy acquiesced, as she left the room.

Esther sought her own little apartment, so dainty and pretty but simple in all its belongings, with a whirl of emotions. Her quiet girlhood home! How many castles had here been built only to crumble! How many dreams had dazzled, to end in bitter awakening! It was a long time before she could fall asleep. She could only think over again and again, how the joyous, fluttering soul, so eager to try its wings over the vast waters of life, had gone forth on its little journey to return, without finding a place on which to soothe its weariness.

CHAPTER XXV.

"EBEN, will you set down. What are you huntin' for?" Aunt Nancy questioned.

"I'm huntin' for the Bible," Uncle Eben groaned. "Jest think on't. Can't find the Bible Thanksgivin' mornin' and me a member. I wish I could ever find things, Ma, where I put 'em. They allus have ter be moved."

"It's exactly where you left it, Eben," Aunt Nancy declared. "For once it wasn't round in the way."

"The Bible in the way, Ma! How dare you think so? But—where on airth?"

"Do you remember, Eben, flyin' out to speak to Mr. Stone at the close of the readin' yesterday mornin'?"

"Yes, I guess I do," Uncle Eben meekly replied.

"Wall," Aunt Nancy announced with great rejoicing, "you laid the Bible on top of the front gate post, and there it is now. I kinder thought, Eben, mebbe your light would shine better that way than any other, you get so kinder spry in your disposition."

"Did you ever see such a Ma, Esther?" Uncle Eben smiled, turning to her. She was arranging some flowers which came from New York the day before.

"What if it had rained, Nancy? Why didn't you tell me in the time on't, and send me back arter it?"

"You had the prayer to make when you came in, and I was afraid if I did you would say it by jerks," Aunt Nancy laughed. "Besides, Eben, you know you sometimes say you are not the sun and moon, and my name

is not Joshua to make 'em go or stop. But we must not talk any longer. Esther will run out for the book."

The hearts of Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy were very full of thanksgiving this morning; Esther was with them and she brought many blessings.

When she first returned to Eaton, she wished to present to the dear old couple a new house. But to this Uncle Eben was stoutly opposed.

"You see, Esther," he said, "we old ones, as Hiram Foss puts it, may not be so young and frisky and bloomin' as we once was, but a leetle grain o' sentiment is yet left in our hearts. They are not wrinkled and sort o' dried up, if our faces have got kinder seamed. And this is the house Ma and I were married in, our new home to be. I suppose the old square room looks sort o' old-fashioned to you; but when I set by the fireplace of an evenin', I often forgit to hear the chatter around me. I am seein' pictures in the blaze. They flit across my memory like a breeze full of sunshine. Nancy was young and comely to look upon with her black bright eyes and roguish ways. We were only sprigs, both of us. She didn't come eighteen till a few weeks after; and I had jest turned twenty-one. Life was all before us, when we stood up in front of the sofa and joined our hands for life. I ain't much given to tellin' my feelin's, Esther, I don't know how very well; but somehow, the songs makin' music in our hearts that day are still echoin' round the room; and the happiness bubblin' over from 'em seems to have left its incense lingerin' there yet. I never can forgit the spell it threw around me, and when I sit and look into the fire, it all comes back, and I'm young once more. That could never be in a new house, Esther. And, sometimes, when I come in to rest and sit down all alone on the

stoop, it kinder seems as if I could hear the patterin' of little feet, and feel chubby arms around my neck, and know little hands are puttin' dandelion chains around it, to dress me up, and roses in my hair, and sometimes a burr," Uncle Eben sadly smiled; "and then I hear 'em clap their hands and laugh because they have made me look so funny. It keeps the heart warm and young, sech things do, Esther, and it wouldn't be the same on a new stoop, in a new yard, with new flowers instid o' the old tansy and roses and larkspur.

"And then," Uncle Eben went on with a huskiness in the voice, "sometimes Ma and I wake up in the night, hearin' the little ones callin' us to make 'em well again, and to keep 'em from bein' so sick, and to get this thing and that to make 'em feel better. In a new house, Esther, they would call and we would not answer. No. The old place is full of joys and sorrows, of trials and victories, and they will not bear transplantin'. We're too old to thrive in a new soil. Let us stay here."

And so the old house was not changed, except to be newly garnished within, and an extension added at one side containing a large room below and one above, which were called Esther's rooms.

When these changes were all finished, Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy held a council. They nodded their heads, and shook them, and puckered their brows in perplexity. Then Esther was admitted to their session.

The time had come for Uncle Eben to disclose the idea which came into his mind the day of Esther's return and which he confided only to Richard.

"You see," Uncle Eben began, "we are so thankful this year to think you are here, and everything so prosperin' that we are goin' ter have a real old-fashioned Thanksgivin'. We'll have the folks up from New York,

and you may have more if you want. Now, my Uncle Hezekiah built this house and lived in it till he died. He had ten boys, and he knew when they got married and had families o' their own, they would all want ter come home Thanksgivin', and they did. That's what made him make sech a big old brick oven. They used ter invite me over when I was a boy, and sech bakin's as that oven did turn out. Tasted the best I ever see. And now, this year we're goin' to have it het up again—how many years is it, Ma, since it was het? Wall, a good many. And you may fix things as nice as you please. And, you know, Esther, it is Ma's and my forty-fifth weddin' anniversary, too. Not quite a golden one, but it will be golden, with you, Little Queen. We will make it so; you may flit away and leave us before another one."

The eventful day had arrived at last, and when Esther restored the lost family Bible, Uncle Eben had forgotten his anxiety over its whereabouts. A deep joy glimmered in and out the lines of the strong face as he read the morning lesson, and the words of prayer were transfigured with the glow of a happy spirit.

But when the devotional exercises were through, there was a great bustle throughout the house. For a week there had been such beating and chopping as the old kitchen had never seen. Savory odors of cranberry tart and pumpkin and apple and mince had whiffed out in a breeze from the old brick oven, and now stood in dignified array beside the puddings and jellies and custards in the back "buttery," awaiting the time when they would be crowned with praise. And now the turkeys and chicken pie sizzled and sputtered within the sacred precincts of that same oven, determined to become tender and brown and altogether luscious.

"I declare, Ma," Uncle Eben would say when Aunt Nancy opened the door to see that all was well, "them scents is better than the whole of Araby the Blest. I don't b'lieve that air had anything but the fragrance to boast of; and these are full to the top and runnin' over, real Scriptor measure, with so many beautiful remembrances, and with blessin's ter come. All the joys of all the Thanksgivin's in my life float right into memory with every breeze from that air oven. It does beat all."

Esther had the whole care of the table. She brought out her own silver and crystal, till Uncle Eben looked on in astonishment.

"Esther," he acknowledged a little shyly, "I didn't know there were sech beautiful dishes ever made. I guess it's about time your old Uncle Eben was gathered to his fathers. The world seems ter be runnin' away from him, and if any body can't keep up,—well—I know there is no place for him on this airth. Things do change so fast, Esther. But I'm glad I'm here ter enjoy this day after all. Ain't it most time for the folks ter come? Seems as if I couldn't wait ter see Richard."

All the happiness of this day in Eaton, however, was not contained in Uncle Eben's household. Every family in the village had been remembered by Esther. The few whose holiday fare must necessarily be meager, were supplied with abundance. To those whose worldly prosperity admitted of all the necessities, she presented a gift of love in memory of the day; while the very small number to whom luxuries were more common than any deprivations of them, were the recipients of flowers.

Perhaps Mrs. Foss was the happy possessor of the greatest amount of solid delight. The mortgage of fifty dollars on the humble home had been canceled the day before. Fifty dollars was a large sum to her; besides,

never in her life had she looked upon as her own, such an array of "goodies" as filled her pantry. Esther had not forgotten Hiram's kindness on a certain summer night.

Small wonder it was, that when the people saw a carriage containing the New York friends at last going through the town, they rejoiced with those waiting to receive them.

Richard could not arrange to leave until this morning, but once here, a whole week was to be given to the holiday. They drove from Hillester so as to be able to take the early express from the city. There was a little disappointment that sleigh bells could not usher in their advent, but the snow, after coquetting with the great feast for several days, decided not to lend its presence to grace the occasion. Bells were not needed, however, to announce their coming, to watchful eyes. At the first sound of wheels Uncle Eben flew to the door, in his haste upsetting the pan of pop corn he was shelling.

"And here you are, my boy," he exclaimed, giving Richard a welcome to be envied. "It sartin does seem as if you was my own! And the pretty little tot," he added, taking little Florence from Ethel.

"Here, Ma," he said to Aunt Nancy who had followed, "you hold the little gal, and be careful not to break her."

"Break her," Aunt Nancy laughed, standing the child on its feet, "she is two years old."

Esther introduced Mrs. Parkman, and Cecil, then said, "The Doctor is not coming?"

"No," was the reply, "Ned has been away so long—in fact, as you know, has just returned home, that he felt he must begin to gather up the scattered threads of business. He sent the best of wishes for you all, and——"

A warning look from Ethel ended the sentence with thanks for their warm welcome as they all proceeded to the house.

A regret at the Doctor's absence flitted over Esther's face, followed by a painful thought. She was thinking of the night in the mountain cottage, and wondering if he told the whole truth, when he called her, "friend." It would sadden all the pleasure if he were away because of a pain in the heart which now she could never heal. But a laugh from Ethel drove the thought away as untrue, and she hurried to learn its cause.

A sudden silence followed her presence, and an evident embarrassment on the part of Uncle Eben; for the good man could never well succeed in making things appear otherwise than they really were. However, he managed to say that as he had never been absent from "sarvice" Thanksgiving day, Richard and Cecil were going with him so as not to keep him at home.

"I've ben tellin' Richard," Uncle Eben said, "that perhaps our doctrines are a bit behind the new fandangled notions, but he can put up with 'em, I guess. And, Richard, some folks think I'm pretty sot on creed, and a mite contrary. But I ain't. I'm too old to change all about now; and everybody's a leetle techy on that p'int. You jest say sprinklin' to a Baptist brother and see how he fires up! You soon agree that consider'ble of a deluge is needed in his case. And then some of 'em are determined nobody shall go to heaven only the ones they picked out; some more are goin' ter take yer straight there whether yer want to go or not, and so it goes. Perhaps after all we'd be safer to do as Neighbor Stone said Jared Bemis said his brother-in-law's father did. Pretty contrary man he was, and kinder scared lest after all he might not hit on the right doc-

trine; so he skipped around; took in election and non-election, heathen damnation and salvation, eternal punishment and none at all, and finally settled down with a pinch of all on 'em. And our minister says, the days when but a few turn out should be the ones to have the choicest morsel to pay 'em, so I kinder guess we'll have a middlin' good repast, Richard."

Indeed, to all, everything throughout the day seemed one continued feast. The dinner, a marvel in its own art, was no more delicious to the taste, than the accompanying good cheer was satisfactory to the heart and soul.

"Your day is a perfect success, Uncle Eben," Mrs. Parkman remarked. "When Esther wrote us it was to be an old-fashioned New England Thanksgiving, brick oven and all, I knew it would be delightful; but imagination failed to grasp its whole atmosphere. We all feel like your own children come home to the roof-tree. I would add something more complimentary, but to me that rings with the highest appreciation I can give. We do enjoy it so much."

Once Uncle Eben received a gentle reprimand.

"Pa," Aunt Nancy reproved, her face so full of smiles that the words could hardly find a way out, "what will people think to see you almost hippy-ter-hoppin' across the yard just like a boy? If Richard is our son, you are Grandpa now; and the head o' the house, too. You must remember your dignity."

"I never had but a pesky little o' that air ingredient, Ma," Uncle Eben apologized, his face beaming with the reflection from within. "And I jest can't help it. In spite o' me my feet will jest fly out in time with the fiddle inside o' me. I had a dreadful time keepin' 'em still in meetin'."

This expression of feeling voiced the exhilarating intoxication so prominent in word and action, even down to little Florence. To Esther, however, beneath all the music and the mirth, rang a low, plaintive chord which she endeavored to conceal. She strove to bloom in beauty by deed and thought for the happy ones around her. She realized that whatever happiness might come to her now, it must necessarily be tinged with gloom; that it could never be one long, clear, sweet note of gladness. While thinking of this inexorable part of her life, she was standing by a window looking out on to the broad piazza. She was also wondering why through all the day voices had often become silent as she approached the speakers; and she remembered with a little trepidation mysterious whispered conferences from which she was excluded. She had come to look for sudden trouble in her life, and wondered if a new burden were kept from her until the merry feast day was over.

Another circumstance perplexed her. Dr. Parkman had returned, but no message had been sent in regard to her letter to Captain Martindale. No definite conclusion could be reached, whether the missive had not been delivered, or had been scorned; and no one, not even Richard, had yet been told the reason of her sudden departure from San Francisco. All knew a misunderstanding had occurred, but could not solve its nature, and they never questioned it, waiting for Esther's confidence which would eventually be given them.

While she stood puzzling over these many things, Richard joined her. The weather was growing cold and bleak, the rising wind rattling its way among the bare vines, and whistling around the corner of the porch so delightfully cool in summer. Neither spoke for awhile, each instinctively divining that the thoughts of the other

were roaming over the olden time when life was opening to the young girl full of fascinating enchantment.

"The old days are buried with the past, Esther," Richard at length said a little mournfully. "But not so far away, may be the dawn of a new bright morning. And may I say this? may I tell you, that brother Ned and you would have added a still stronger bond to our family ties. Mrs. Parkman is really much disappointed, but she says as the non-attraction between her son and yourself appears to be mutual, she can blame no one. Ned seems wholly wedded to bachelorhood, and consequently she has accepted other certainties with undiminished affection."

Then Ethel came to them with a request.

"Esther," she said blithely, "it is a queer idea, perhaps, but we have learned that men sometimes entertain unexpected notions. Have you told her, Richard?"

"No," was the reply, "I left it for you. If it be frivolous, I naturally feel delicate in asking it. I am cautious of my reputation."

"Richard wishes us to dress for the evening," Ethel announced. "Mother has gone to her room to comply with the request, and Aunt Nancy is already sitting in state. When Richard speaks there is no delay with her. She looks very placid and sweet in her new satin gown. And, dear," Ethel smiled, with a caress, "we wish you to wear the white silk with the square neck and white lace overdress. Will you?"

"Certainly," Esther responded heartily. "I think it a pretty idea, Richard. I wonder we did not think of it ourselves."

"And," Ethel continued as the group separated, "the day has been so full of delightful things, we have omitted telling you a nice bit of news, not because we forgot it, but because we saved it for a pleasant surprise. Your

old traveling companions, Mr. and Mrs. Sampson, are coming Saturday. They are in New York."

Esther received the news with a feeling of delight mingled with wonder and regret. She felt helpless to adjust herself to circumstances till she knew what they required of her. One idea was dominant. She would probably no longer wrestle with doubt or with grief. The first would be resolved into certainty; the latter would have come to abide with her; to be an ever present companion.

While dressing she again vividly lived through the startling changes in her life, every detail persistently thrusting itself forward. Each ray of light ever seemed to leave a still darker shadow behind, and when she again joined the friends below there was a feeling of helplessness, that she must drift with the tide wherever it might carry her.

The shadows had also darkened within, and the night was growing dim without. Then, lights glimmered here and there till the house was quite ablaze, while the large, hospitable fireplace threw a rich glow over all.

Uncle Eben was in the kitchen, shelling some more pop corn. Little Florence was perched on one knee, and Cecil stood very near, listening intently to Uncle Eben's description of things when he was a boy.

Mrs. Parkman and Aunt Nancy were cosily exchanging experiences in the culinary art in the comfortable corner of the sitting room, while Ethel and Richard were intently watching the passersby.

A look of relief swept over Ethel's face, when Esther appeared.

"How sweet you are to-night," she whispered in Esther's ear, arranging a fall of lace. Then she was conscious of a loss of words.

"Now, Little Queen," Uncle Eben said, appearing in the doorway, "before we go any further with the festivities, won't you sing awhile for us? Ethel has got the new fangled candles lit in the parlor, a lot of 'em; and I must say they do give the prettiest, softest light ever was if they be wax. We'll all jest stay out here and listen.

"It does beat all," Uncle Eben reasoned, when Esther had disappeared, "how much maneuverin' it takes for one little surprise. It's almost leaked right out o' my tongue ever so many times to-day; but we wanted to be sure that Rodney would come to-night; that he wouldn't be hindered; that there was no mistake before we told on't, didn't we? And we've got her in there at last. It's almost time now."

Then they listened to the voice which ever grew more brilliant. Esther first sang a few hymns which were favorites of Uncle Eben and Aunt Nancy. These were followed by ballads, both stirring and plaintive. Then, as she chanced to turn to the "Lost Chord," she struck the accompaniment to the deep rich melody. She had never sung the words so fraught with meaning since the eventful night of Mrs. Harleston's reception.

She became so absorbed as she sang, that she did not hear a ringing step on the walk outside; she was wholly oblivious to the fact that Ethel quietly opened the door, and that a suppressed murmur of greeting and explanation followed. She was unmindful of a hushed foot-fall within the room, and the gentle closing of the door behind it.

*"I have sought but I seek it vainly
That one lost chord divine,
Which came from the soul of the organ,
And entered into mine.*

*It may be that Death's bright angel,
Will speak in that chord again;
It may be only in Heaven
I shall hear the grand Amen.'"*

The sweet, sad notes died away, leaving a healing balm for the weary heart. A solemn peace fell upon the singer as she bowed her head, still listening to the plaintive melody echoing and re-echoing through her soul.

"May it not be found on earth?" a voice softly murmured; "that one lost chord divine?"

Esther raised her head and turned to see Rodney Martindale before her. Her lips paled, and the conflict within her would not let the words answer.

"Esther, will you come?" the tender voice called, as Rodney opened his arms to receive her.

Slowly, silently, with eyes full of wonder and joy, yet veiled with a shadow which would never leave them, she crept into the loving shelter. She had found her haven of rest, her harbor-home. With heart to heart and lip to lip, as yet each too full of thoughts to speak, we will leave them in their happiness.

At the same hour, alone, Neidhurd Parkman looked out into the darkness. He was in the midst of the barren plain, so vast there was no horizon, with only the moan of the wind for sound.

A year in a man's life! What has it profited?

If all the items could be reckoned, on which side of the account would the balance stand?

NOTE.—Dr. Parkman never married. He was known as a pillar of strength in all emergencies in the lives of others, and became very highly honored in his profession.

THE END.

GRAFTON PRESS PUBLICATIONS

REMEMBRANCES OF EMERSON

By JOHN ALBEE

12mo, Cloth, \$1.25

EDWARD W. EMERSON, son of the philosopher, says: "When I first heard Mr. Albee read the story of his first visit to our house in Concord, the account of the evening spent there in talk with my father, and Mr. Thoreau amusing himself with us children, and occasionally throwing in a word of critical humor into the more serious conversation, it seemed as if a door had been suddenly opened back into my childhood—the picture was so true in every particular."

IN OUDEMON

Reminiscences of an Unknown People by an Occasional Traveler

Edited by HENRY S. DRAYTON, M.D.

Author of "*Light in Dark Places*," "*Human Magnetism*," etc., etc.

12mo, Cloth, \$1.50

THIS is an interesting story of experiences in a strange land, which is located by the author in the heart of South America. There is an attractive vein of romance running through the tale, which entertainingly exploits the author's ethical and sociological theories.

THE DAYS AND THE YEAR

By HARRIET F. BLODGETT

16mo, Cloth, Ornamental, \$1.00

THE attractive verses in this volume, intended chiefly for children, will doubtless appeal largely to older people also. Readers of *Puck*, *St. Nicholas*, *The Youth's Companion*, and *The Independent* have already had the pleasure of seeing some of them.

OLD TIMES IN DIXIE LAND

A Southern Matron's Memories

By Mrs. CAROLINE ELIZABETH MERRICK

12mo, Cloth, Frontispiece Portrait, \$1.50

THE author of this interesting and enjoyable volume of reminiscences is widely known, both in this country and abroad, as one of the most distinguished representative women of the South. The book abounds in anecdotes of the most interesting personal character and with such relation to events of the various periods of which Mrs. Merrick writes as to give it high historic value.

SLEEPY HOLLOW CHURCH RECORDS

By Rev. DAVID COLE, D.D.

Quarto, Cloth, \$5.00

THIS is the first record book of the "Old Dutch Church of Sleepy Hollow."

It is an original translation of its brief historical matter, and a copy of every personal and local name, of its four registers of members, consistorymen, baptisms, and marriages, from its organization to 1791.

THE GRAFTON PRESS, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York

GRAFTON PRESS PUBLICATIONS

NEWYORKITIS

By JOHN H. GIRDNER, M.D.

12mo, Cloth, Decorative Cover, \$1.25

"A MOST ingenious arraignment of New York life by a very clever man."—*N. Y. Times*. "New York is writhing under the keen thrusts which have been given it by Dr. John H. Girdner."—*Denver Republican*. "A stinging satire."—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*. "Well worth study."—*Chicago Evening Post*. "Will promote good thinking."—*Brooklyn Citizen*. "Important contribution to medical and social science."—*New York World*.

GOD AND THE SOUL

And Other Poems

By JOHN LANCASTER SPALDING, Bishop of Peoria

Author of "Songs: Chiefly from the German," etc.

12mo, Cloth, \$1.25

THE delightful style and life experience of this well-known writer are a sufficient guarantee of the contents of this his latest volume.

BRITAIN'S BLEST WITH, RIGHTEOUSNESS?

By JOHN W. RODDY

Small 16mo, Paper, 75 cents

THESE cleverly written poems reveal the author's opposition to English policies. They are well worth the reading.

A GENTLEMAN IN WAITING

A Story of New York Society

By CORNELIUS V. V. SEWELL

12mo, Cloth, Decorative Cover, \$1.50

A YOUNG New York society man herein writes most intimately of the people about him; and, as the *Brooklyn Eagle* says, "gives a very good picture of the humdrum but healthy routine of a suburban place."

FOREST TREES AND FOREST SCENERY

By G. FREDERICK SCHWARZ

Field Assistant in the Bureau of Forestry, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Member of various Forestry Associations, etc.

12mo, Cloth, Illustrated, \$1.50

THE author of this admirably written book describes, in a popular style, the sources of beauty and attractiveness in American forest trees and sylvan scenery.

THE GRAFTON PRESS, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York

GRAFTON PRESS PUBLICATIONS

JOSEPHINE

Empress of the French

By FREDERICK A. OBER

Illustrated, 8vo, Gilt Top, Uncut, \$2.00

AS the only American woman to occupy a throne of Europe, Josephine naturally excites a peculiar sympathy in the breasts of all on this side of the ocean, and this—the first really complete biography of her—is written by an experienced author who made many visits to the scenes of her birth and her childhood.

RANDOM FANCIES, SONNETS AND TRANSLATIONS

By JAMES B. TOWNSEND

Vellum Covers, 75 cents

"MR. TOWNSEND writes with much refinement and culture, but he writes naturally and with a true poet's appreciation of his theme."
New York Times Saturday Review.

INSIDE THE MACHINE

Two Years in the Board of Aldermen

By P. TECUMSEH SHERMAN

Paper, 50 cents

"THE author, who (like his famous father) is a good deal of a fighter, criticises severely the defects of the new city charter, and pokes fun at the illiterate aldermen with whom his days were passed."—*The Critic*, New York.

THE ROMANCE OF A TRAINED NURSE

By FRANCINA SCOTT

12mo, Cloth, Illustrated, \$1.50

THE *Chicago Chronicle* says: "The heroine is in every way worthy to represent the noble class of women to which she belongs; and *The Trained Nurse Magazine*: "We welcome this book."

ABOUT THE BIBLE

Being a Collection of Extracts from Writings of Eminent Biblical Scholars and of Scientists of Europe and America

By CHARLES L. HAMMOND

12mo, Cloth, Illustrated, \$1.25

ANDREW D. WHITE, *Ambassador to Germany*, writes:

"I HAVE read 'About the Bible' with care, and feel that you have done a good thing for our people and for religion in general."

THE GRAFTON PRESS, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York

